

IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY IN THE WEBLOGS OF  
MUSLIM WOMEN OF MIDDLE EASTERN AND NORTH AFRICAN  
DESCENT LIVING IN THE UNITED STATES

By

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Ashley Dyess Sink

This thesis is dedicated to the women who enabled me to see beyond my assumptions and gave me a passion for intercultural communication. They were Lebanese, Mexican-American, Latvian, Armenian, Syrian, Palestinian, Israeli, Iranian, Korean, Taiwanese, Sri Lankan, African-American, European American; Christian, Muslim, Jewish, atheist, agnostic; young, middle-aged, and elderly.

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In recent years, media attention in the United States increasingly has turned to Arabs and Muslims. But few of the voices speaking are those of the people in question. Muslim women, especially, are seldom heard in the mainstream. However, many of them are speaking, telling their stories to audiences large and small through new technology on the Internet. Weblogs, online personal journals, allow anyone with access to the Internet to become a published author. These sites of dialogue and intimate revelation offer unique insights into their authors' lives. In this thesis, in-depth qualitative textual analysis was used to examine the weblogs of six Muslim women of Middle Eastern or North African descent (MMENA) living in the United States and writing in English to understand how they use their blogs to negotiate identity and create community. Intercultural communication theories (specifically Ting-Toomey's identity negotiation theory, Hofstede's cultural dimensions, and Tajfel's social identity theory), computer-



mediated communication theories, and existing literature on Muslim women were all incorporated.

The women addressed identity within several different areas, in each one displaying a “paradox of identity”: what Edward Said also called “plurality of vision” or “a constant contest between cultures.” They were aware of more than one culture (that of mainstream United States and the culture of their heritage), were fully part of neither of them, and fully felt the dissonances between them. This conflict was strengthened by their membership in a culture currently faced with prejudice from United States culture as a whole. Their blogs seemed to be a kind of identity workshop, a fluid space between the different aspects of who they are. Within them, they negotiated personal identity, gender identity, and cultural/ethnic identity. They built two kinds of community through their blogs: that which was based on face-to-face relationships and was an extension of everyday interactions, and that which was based primarily on computer-mediated interactions. The blogs all displayed, to some extent, a "sense of community" involving feelings of membership, the fulfillment of needs, and a shared emotional connection.

This is the first study to address MMENA women in relation to their use of blogs. The paradox of identity the women experienced is important to understand in the context of today’s society in the US. It appears that outsiders’ perceptions of MMENA Americans have a great impact on these women, perhaps greater than they would have on women of different backgrounds, because of their high level of communalism and their status as female members of a non-dominant group within the US.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, media attention in the United States increasingly has turned to Arabs and Muslims. Questions about religion, violence, and women's roles are asked and answered. But few of the voices speaking are those of the people in question. Muslim women, especially, are seldom heard in the mainstream. However, many of them are speaking, telling their stories to audiences large and small through new technology on the Internet. Weblogs, online personal journals, allow anyone with access to the Internet to become a published author. These sites of dialogue and intimate revelation offer unique insights into their authors' lives.<sup>1</sup>

Muslim women of Middle Eastern and North African descent living in America and writing in English have a distinctive presence in the blogosphere. Through the words and images presented on their blogs, they construct and communicate the identities and communities in which they live. Many are part of bloggings (groups of bloggers who link to the sites of others with specific interests) related to issues they deal with on a daily basis. In this thesis, I will seek to offer an answer to the question: How do Muslim women of Middle Eastern and North African descent living in America use personal blogs to create identity and community?

After living in the Middle East for several years, I became fascinated with the pervasiveness of stories in everyday conversation. Upon learning more about Muslim

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Reed, "My Blog Is Me': Texts and Persons in UK Online Journal Culture (and anthropology)," *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 70, no. 2 (June 2005): 226.

Middle Eastern and North African (MMENA) descendant communities in the United States and the complexities of a marginalized group's communication, I developed an interest in learning about the stories they tell, both to each other and to the rest of the world. The rich oral heritage of MMENA tradition coupled with the generally high education levels of this group in the United States<sup>2</sup> make the weblog an ideal medium for their storytelling: though it demands written communication, it also has strong elements of orality.<sup>3</sup> Studying MMENA women's weblogs offers insight into how they present themselves to themselves, each other, and the general public, as well as how they form and maintain communities.

My personal experiences in Lebanon and my interest in women's communication led me to conduct this study. I spent three years in Lebanon where I taught English and worked with a women's organization. I learned to speak Arabic and made many close friends. My experiences with Lebanese people and culture were so positive that I was often shocked by Western responses to the region. Upon my return to the United States, the media's portrayal of MMENA women surprised and angered me. I also dealt with reverse culture shock, which gave me an interest in bicultural individuals.

Because blogging is a relatively new phenomenon in an unorganized yet complex environment, research is still in the exploratory stages. Recent studies examined uses and gratifications of writing and reading blogs using both quantitative<sup>4</sup> and qualitative<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Je'nan Ghazal Read, *Culture, Class, and Work among Arab-American Women* (New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC, 2004): 8.

<sup>3</sup> Kristin Langellier and Eric Peterson, *Storytelling in Daily Life: Performing Narrative* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004): 159–188.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Kaye, "It's a Blog, Blog, Blog World: Users and Uses of Weblogs," *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 13, no. 2 (2005): 73–95.

approaches; the development of blogging communities among those of similar interests<sup>6</sup> including knitting<sup>7</sup> or cooking;<sup>8</sup> and the presentation of self by various groups of people through blogs<sup>9</sup> such as teenagers,<sup>10</sup> teenage girls,<sup>11</sup> and young Londoners.<sup>12</sup> This study is unique in that it focuses on blogging both as a form of intercultural communication and identity construction for a specific religious, ethnic and age cohort, i.e., young MMENA women.

Chapter two of this thesis provides an overview of the scholarship relevant to the various dimensions of the research question including intercultural communication theories; computer-mediated communication; blogging; and MMENA identity, community, and media use. Chapter three outlines the research methods. Areas covered are participant selection, data collection, methods of analysis, researcher reflexivity, and

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<sup>5</sup> Bonnie A. Nardi, Diane J. Schiano, Michelle Gumbrecht, and Luke Swartz, "Why We Blog," *Communications of the ACM* 47 no. 12 (December 2004): 41-46.

<sup>6</sup> Barry Wellman, and Milena Gulia, "Virtual Communities as Communities: Net Surfers Don't Ride Alone," In Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock, eds., *Communities in Cyberspace* [electronic resource] (London, New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Carolyn Wei, "Formation of Norms in a Blog Community," In L. J. Gurak, S. Antonijevic, L. Johnson, C. Ratliff, and J. Reyman, eds, *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community, and Culture of Weblogs* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2004): <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Anita Blanchard, "Blogs as Virtual Communities: Identifying a Sense of Community in the *Julie/Julia Project*," In L. J. Gurak, S. Antonijevic, L. Johnson, C. Ratliff, and J. Reyman, eds, *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community, and Culture of Weblogs* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2004): <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Vincent W. Hevem, "Threaded Identity in Cyberspace: Weblogs and Positioning in the Dialogical Self," *Identity* 4, no. 4 (October 2004): 321-335.

<sup>10</sup> David Huffaker, "Gender Similarities and Differences in Online Identity and Language Use among Teenage Bloggers," MA thesis, Georgetown University, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Denise Sevick Bortree, "Presentation of Self on the Web: An Ethnographic Study of Teenage Girls' Weblogs," *Education, Communication & Information* 5, no. 1 (March 2005): 25-39.

<sup>12</sup> Reed, "My Blog Is Me," 220-242.

ethical considerations. Chapter four discusses the findings of the study, and chapter five places them in the larger theoretical context.

## CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In the following review of the literature, I examine scholarship relevant to the various dimensions of my research question. First, I begin with an overview of intercultural communication. Following are discussions regarding specific intercultural communication theories related to personal and group identity. I then move to an examination of current research on computer-mediated communication (CMC), especially in relation to identity and community (particularly diasporic) formation. Literature on blogging, a subset of CMC, is reviewed next, again with attention to the construction of identity and community. As my research focuses on the blogging behaviors of Muslim women of Middle Eastern and North African descent, I then survey work on this specific group of women and their identities and communities. Finally, I discuss gaps and documented needs for further study in the literature.

### **Identity in Intercultural Communication**

Intercultural communication occurs between unlike individuals of different cultures. Research in this area began at the United States Foreign Service Institute in response to the increasing diplomatic involvement of the United States around the world. Areas of study traditionally include nonverbal communication, assimilation, sojourning, culture shock, ethnocentrism, prejudice, and individualism-collectivism. Conception of

the self is a salient dimension of these areas, and identity issues are often incorporated into studies focusing on these topics.<sup>1</sup>

In her identity negotiation theory of intercultural communication, Ting-Toomey synthesized insights from many intercultural communication researchers with findings from her own work. In this theory, identity is defined as the self-reflections or self-images derived from socializing processes such as culture, ethnicity, and gender that are practiced, constructed, and expressed through specific interactions. It consists of eight “domains” in two categories: primary identity dimensions including cultural, ethnic, gender, and personal identities; and situationally dependent identity dimensions including role, relational, facework, and symbolic interaction identities. Negotiation is a two-way communication process in which individuals reinforce, change, support, or challenge each others’ self-images. Thus, the theory states that the dimensions of an individual’s identity are constantly negotiated during intercultural communication.<sup>2</sup>

Ten core assumptions further define the theory: group and personal identities are products of symbolic interaction, needs for identity stability and connection are constant across cultures, identity security or vulnerability depends on the familiarity of the environment, identity trust is created with similar others, in-group membership endorsements enhance feelings of inclusion, close relationships are desired but not a function of identity autonomy, culture familiarity leads to a perception of identity stability, identity dimensions influence the interpretation of identity themes, feelings of

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<sup>1</sup> William B. Gudykunst and Bella Mody, eds., *Handbook of International and Intercultural Communication*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002), 2–7.

<sup>2</sup> Stella Ting-Toomey, *Communicating Across Cultures* (New York: The Guildford Press, 1999), 26–54.

respect and support are outcomes of satisfactory identity negotiation, and finally, mindful intercultural communication integrates these assumptions with knowledge, motivation, and skills to communicate effectively.<sup>3</sup>

Intercultural communication scholars often examine value systems across cultures. Hofstede devised the primary system of cultural variability, which includes individualism-collectivism as the most often researched and practical of the dimensions.<sup>4</sup> Ting-Toomey argues that identity, or self-conception, is highly linked to the individualism-collectivism dimension. Those from individualistic cultures are likely to perceive identity based on independent self-construals, personal self-esteem, and generalized-based interaction. On the other hand, the identities of individuals from collectivistic cultures depend more on interdependent self-construals, group self-esteem, and in-group based interaction.<sup>5</sup>

Tajfel's social identity theory further explains the intersection of group and individual identities: self-image is improved (or worsened) dependent upon both in-group and personal identity. Thus, an individual may enhance her personal identity by building up her group identity, which in turn enhances her personal identity. This relationship leads to loyalty to and preference for the self and the in-group to the exclusion of out-groups (dissimilar, disconnected, and/or distrusted groups).<sup>6</sup> Phinney proposed that ethnic groups or minorities living within a dominant culture have further identity dimensions to

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 40–41.

<sup>4</sup> Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1980).

<sup>5</sup> Ting-Toomey, *Communicating Across Cultures*, 76.

<sup>6</sup> H. Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981).



negotiate in communication with out-group members. At any given point, an individual from a minority or ethnic group holds a specific part or parts of her identity as most salient; whether ethnic belonging, ethnic identity achievement, ethnic practices, or other-group orientation.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, for members of one of these groups, the community, or in-group, likely plays a larger role in personal identity formation than it does for members of the dominant culture.

Orbe created co-cultural theory to describe the interactions between dominant and non-dominant, or co-cultural, groups. Using phenomenological inquiry, he discovered that co-cultural individuals may use assertive, nonassertive, or aggressive communication strategies to interact with the dominant group. They also have specific orientations regarding how they should respond to the dominant group's culture: assimilation, accommodation, or separation. He described nine possible combinations of orientations and communication strategies in an attempt to understand the relationships between power and communication in society.<sup>8</sup>

### **Computer-Mediated Communication**

As computers have become more pervasive in our society, their uses have necessarily expanded from scientific calculation machines to tools for ordinary people to use on a daily basis. This use often takes the form of computer-mediated communication (CMC), an over-arching term referring to communication between humans that uses computers as the medium. It may be defined as “a process by which a group of social actors in a given situation negotiates the meaning of the various situations, which rise

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<sup>7</sup> Jean S. Phinney, “The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure: A New Scale for Use with Diverse Groups,” *Journal of Adolescent Research* 7, 156–176.

<sup>8</sup> Mark P. Orbe, *Constructing Co-cultural Theory: An Explication of Culture, Power, and Communication* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998), 50–120.

between them.”<sup>9</sup> Lindlof and Taylor define CMC as “the process through which humans create, maintain, and transform meaning by interacting as users of computerized systems of communication.”<sup>10</sup> They note that while computers increasingly are integrated with existing communications systems (such as telephone and television), they are simultaneously improving in speed, ease of use, and sophistication as well as affordability. Not surprisingly, the use of the Internet is growing as well: by the end of 2004, 63 percent of adults and 81 percent of teenagers in the United States were online. Of these, 84 percent are members of an online group or community, 27 percent read blogs, and 7 percent have created their own blogs.<sup>11</sup>

The possibilities inherent in CMC are infinite—democratization of the public sphere, new possibilities for relationship and community formation, unfettered personal development.<sup>12</sup> Particularly as Internet use increases, more people become published authors and artists online. Papacharissi calls this widespread tool “a new channel of mass communication that allows everyone to become a producer of media content, providing people with access to a mass audience that they would otherwise be unable to reach.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Giuseppe Riva, “The Sociocognitive Psychology of Computer-Mediated Communication: The Present and Future of Technology-Based Interactions,” *CyberPsychology and Behavior* 5, no. 6 (December 2002): 596, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas R. Lindlof and Brian C. Taylor, *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002), 249.

<sup>11</sup> Pew Internet and American Life Project, “Internet: The Mainstreaming of Online Life” (January 25, 2005): 58, [http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/Internet\\_Status\\_2005.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/Internet_Status_2005.pdf), accessed April 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Heidi Campbell, “Considering Spiritual Dimensions Within Computer-mediated Communication Studies,” *New Media and Society* 7, no. 1 (2005): 117, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Zizi Papacharissi, “The Presentation of Self in Virtual Life,” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 79, no 3 (2002): 658.

### CMC Research Directions

Lindlof and Taylor, in their handbook of qualitative research, examine the research trends to date. As of 2002, CMC research centered on five main areas, all specific technologies which function as sites of communication: email, bulletin board systems (BBS), Internet relay chat (IRC), multiple user domains (MUD, MOO, or MUSH), and web pages. Within these five areas, qualitative researchers deal primarily with issues of identity, relationship, and community.

CMC identity research typically covers topics such as self-presentation, new possibilities for self-expression, web subcultures, and the effect of CMC on traditional ways of being. Relationship-focused research divides into three distinct schools of thought: the “cues filtered out” approach characterizing CMC as cold and impersonal, the “social information processing” perspective proposing that meaningful interactions can form through CMC in time, and the “hyper-personal” approach involving idealization of individuals which produces quicker intimacy than face-to-face interactions. Research on CMC-based communities is often controversial. The very idea of community in a virtual environment is debatable.<sup>14</sup> In fact, some studies have examined if purported virtual or online communities were even communities at all.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Lindlof and Taylor, *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*, 252–256.

<sup>15</sup> Anita Blanchard, “Blogs as Virtual Communities: Identifying a Sense of Community in the Julie/Julia Project,” in L. J. Gurak, S. Antonijevic, L. Johnson, C. Ratliff, and J. Reyman, eds, *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community, and Culture of Weblogs* (2004), <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere>, accessed April 2006.

## Theories of CMC

As we become more and more reliant upon technology in general and CMC in particular to accomplish everyday tasks, a “culture of cyberspace”<sup>16</sup> forms. Fernback argued that this culture differs “anthropologically, socially, and literally from ‘physical’ culture,” differences which “shape the making of meaning.”<sup>17</sup> She notes the development of cyber-literacy into a necessary skill as a major influence over existing communication patterns. CMC, she argues, could be a revolution in human cognition: a new melding of oral and textual cultures. It is both cultural environment and channel of communication. She concludes, “The realm of CMC is a site of oral culture, albeit an oral culture with distinctly print characteristics.”<sup>18</sup>

Campbell proposed four perspectives on the Internet and the communication that flows through it: the Internet as information space (utilitarian), a common mental geography (conceptual), an identity workshop (experimental), or a social space (social). These may combine to form a sacramental space, one accessed for the purpose of seeking spiritual meaning. She notes that the social space perspective allows researchers to study the human interactions that take place through the Internet, such as CMC.<sup>19</sup>

Riva noted several prevalent theories related to CMC. First, he referred to CMC as “an efficient form of miscommunication:”<sup>20</sup> because a message sender is bodily distanced

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<sup>16</sup> Jan Fernback, “Legends on the Net: An Examination of Computer-Mediated Communication as a Locus of Oral Culture,” *New Media and Society* 5, no. 1 (March 2003): 39, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>19</sup> Campbell, “Considering Spiritual Dimensions,” 114–119.

<sup>20</sup> Riva, “Sociocognitive Psychology,” 582.

from the message receiver, the usual conventions of communication are not present. Interaction is therefore more uncertain and more prone to misunderstanding. The “social vacuum” is another interpretation of CMC: because individuals are physically isolated, they are not bound by usual social rules. This is related to the “cues filtered out” perspective. In time, adherents assert, individuals lose their personal identities in the impersonal and unbounded world of CMC. In contrast to this, Riva proposes the social identity model of deindividuation effect (SIDE): a CMC user’s actions are influenced by invisible social norms as well as individual cognition. Because CMC lacks verbal and nonverbal physical cues, social norms are in fact more important, as the individual bases her actions on real-world expectations.<sup>21</sup>

### **Virtual Communities Resulting from CMC**

Sociologists, according to Wellman and Gulia, have worried about the destruction of community by technology for many years. On the contrary, it has been found that technology (including cars and phones) enhances long-distance relationships, in turn building social networks that exist on a global scale rather than within a single neighborhood. These social networks depend less on socioeconomics and gender than they do on shared interests. Thus, while geographically based communities tend to be homogeneous in social characteristics, technology based communities (such as those on the Internet) are often heterogeneous in social characteristics but homogeneous in interests and attitudes.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, while technology based interaction may create

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 584.

<sup>22</sup> Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia, “Virtual Communities as Communities: Net Surfers Don’t Ride Alone,” in Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock, eds., *Communities in Cyberspace* [electronic resource] (London, New York: Routledge, 2003), 169.

communities across borders of time and space; it also serves to strengthen and maintain relationships based on face-to-face interaction.<sup>23</sup>

As noted above, some scholars question if CMC can ever result in a true community. Online groups that are not considered communities are called simply virtual groups.<sup>24</sup> Jones suggests that it is important for researchers to draw a distinction between the technology that connects a virtual group and the relationships that make the group a community. He uses archaeological terms to suggest first identifying “virtual settlements” then examining the cultural artifacts extant in the settlement. The artifacts (postings, structure, and content) lead to an interpretation and identification of the community.<sup>25</sup> In order to be considered a settlement (and subsequently a community), the virtual site must have “a minimal number of public interactions with a variety of communicators in which there is a minimal level of sustained membership over time.”<sup>26</sup> Relationships and emotional ties develop in the community over time as an outgrowth of interactions between communicators.

Blanchard expanded on Jones’ settlement idea by arguing that these emotional ties may be defined as “sense of community.” She proposes that sense of community is what separates a virtual community from a virtual group. It includes feelings of membership

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<sup>23</sup> Harry H. Hiller and Tara M. Franz, “New Ties, Old Ties, and Lost Ties: The Use of the Internet in Diaspora,” *New Media and Society* 6, no. 6 (2004): 732, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Blanchard, “Blogs as Virtual Communities: Identifying a Sense of Community in the *Julie/Julia Project*,” paragraph 3.

<sup>25</sup> Quentin Jones, “Virtual-communities, Virtual Settlements and Cyber-archaeology: A Theoretical Outline,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 3 no. 3 (1997): 24, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>26</sup> Blanchard, “Identifying a Sense of Community, paragraph 13.

and influence, the fulfillment of needs, and a shared emotional connection.<sup>27</sup> Virtual groups desire to be “communities” for several reasons, she notes. Community is sought-after as meeting a human need for relationships that are increasingly difficult in the isolationist American culture. As more of the world’s population comes online, global communities are possible, fostering dialogue as well as other social benefits. Membership in a virtual community may increase one’s involvement in face-to-face communities and activism. Additionally, a virtual community, unlike a group, is sustainable; an important characteristic for the social and emotional wellbeing of participants as well as more material (often financial) concerns of sponsors.<sup>28</sup>

Diasporic communities offer unique insights into the community building possibilities of CMC, as they consist of a group of people with relatively homogeneous social characteristics and possibly heterogeneous interests bound by a common stake in a homeland. Diasporas usually exhibit at least some of the following characteristics: dispersal from the homeland under duress, emigration because of economic problems or colonization, shared stories and memory of the homeland, an idealized view of the homeland, widespread desire to return, strong identification as an ethnic group, discontent or discrimination within the host society, and solidarity with others from the homeland across national borders.<sup>29</sup> Diasporic identity is usually only one element of a person’s identity construction, which also includes gender, class, age, and other factors.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Joshua Kaldor-Robinson, “The Virtual and the Imaginary: The Role of Diasporic New Media in the Construction of a National Identity during the Break-up of Yugoslavia,” *Oxford Development Studies* 30, no. 2 (June 2002): 178, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

Notably, diasporic identity is highly flexible, tending to change dramatically over short periods of time depending on geopolitical factors.<sup>30</sup>

Hiller and Franz note that diasporic virtual communities substitute for expensive visits home and daily interaction with those from the same geographic area. It may function as both an interest-based and geographically based community. For recent migrants, a virtual community functions as an alleviator of homesickness, partner in culture shock, and helper with assimilation into the new culture. For those who are more settled in a new culture, the virtual community serves to reestablish lost or neglected ties or fuel a sense of nostalgia about the homeland. Thus, the community in these cases forms from a “generalized sense of belonging...based on group identity and a territorial homeland.”<sup>31</sup> Recent studies of diasporic communities online found they are used for connection, support, and political activism among migrants from areas as diverse as Haiti,<sup>32</sup> Newfoundland,<sup>33</sup> and Yugoslavia.<sup>34</sup>

### **Identity in CMC**

Social psychologist Sherry Turkle pioneered research of identity in CMC with studies of MUD players’ interactions. In face-to-face interviews with over a thousand players as well as participation in multiple MUDs, she found identity in cyberspace to be a concept disconnected from the body, constantly moving between genders, roles, and

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>31</sup> Hiller and Franz, “New Ties,” 735–748.

<sup>32</sup> Angel Adams Parham, “Diaspora, Community, and Communication: Internet Use in Transnational Haiti,” *Global Networks* 4, no. 2 (April 2004): 199–217, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>33</sup> Hiller and Franz, “New Ties.”

<sup>34</sup> Kaldor-Robinson, “The Virtual and the Imaginary.”



relationships. The computer provides a stage for soliloquies or large-scale dramas where players act out fantasies, constructing their identities and exploring formative concepts.<sup>35</sup>

Talamo and Ligorio studied identity construction in “Euroland,” a virtual community for students and teachers in which participants created a fictional identity consisting of a name, visual representation, and specific actions such as text-based chat. They found that in this context, individuals created their identities in relation to others (“positioning”) and in direct relation to the opportunities and interactions offered within the virtual world. Three factors play a role in virtual identity construction overall: the ability to remain anonymous, communication that is either synchronous (which does not allow an individual to spend time carefully constructing interaction) or asynchronous (which allows for more careful self-presentation), and the availability of both visual and textual representations.<sup>36</sup>

Papacharissi examined personal web pages to understand how self may be presented in a virtual environment. The perception of self by others in this case cannot rely on traditional markers of social status like appearance. Instead, web page creators tended to depend on links to indicate their likes and dislikes to viewers. Features such as email, guest books, and traffic counters reflected a desire for social interaction. Additionally, Papacharissi interpreted membership in web page communities as a need for affiliation and validation by others that the self presented is accepted.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Sherry Turkle, “Identity in the Age of the Internet,” In Mackay, Hugh, and O’Sullivan, Tim, eds., *The Media Reader: Continuity and Transformation* (London: Sage Publications, 1999), 287–304.

<sup>36</sup> Alessandra Talamo and Beatrice Ligorio, “Strategic Identities in Cyberspace,” *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 4, no. 1 (2001): 109–111, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>37</sup> Papacharissi, “The Presentation of Self,” 655.

### A New Form of CMC: The Weblog

In its simplest form, a weblog (or blog) is simply “an online journal of...opinions, thoughts, and interests.”<sup>38</sup> Blogs typically have one author who posts entries that display in chronological order with the most recent post at the top of the webpage. They may also include links to other blogs or sites of interest, an image and/or biography of the author, audio, video, a comments section for other bloggers to post responses, and a guestbook. Unlike earlier forms of CMC, such as personal webpages, blogs are stricter in their format (time/date stamps on entries, chronological listing of posts) and easier to use for those with lower levels of technology skills, as they require only a basic knowledge of computer use in order to be published.<sup>39</sup> Wilson notes that blogs have given greater voice to those who are not often heard in the public sphere, such as women, and increased a sense of empowerment through cross-validation of the opinions and thoughts of authors by other bloggers.<sup>40</sup> Most blogs are narrative in format and structured around the personality of the author. Some consider their blogs an extension of self, a facet of their personalities revealed in public; one blogger described blogs as “the great I am.”<sup>41</sup> Some call blogs a “conversation” based on the social currency of links, referring to and reading others’ blogs.<sup>42</sup> While over 70 percent of blogs are considered personal journals, other

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<sup>38</sup> Trish Wilson, “Women in the Blogosphere,” *Off Our Backs* 35, no. 5/6 (May/June 2005): paragraph 4, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com), accessed April 2006.

<sup>39</sup> David Huffaker, “Gender Similarities and Differences in Online Identity and Language Use among Teenage Bloggers” (MA thesis, Georgetown University, 2004), 30.

<sup>40</sup> Wilson, “Women in the Blogosphere,” paragraph 4.

<sup>41</sup> Adam Reed, “‘My Blog Is Me’: Texts and Persons in UK Online Journal Culture (and Anthropology),” *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 70, no. 2 (June 2005): 226.

<sup>42</sup> Cameron Marlow, “Audience, Structure and Authority in the Weblog Community,” paper presented at the meeting of the 54th Annual Conference, International Communication Association, New Orleans (May, 2004), <http://web.media.mit.edu/~cameron/cv/pubs/04-01.pdf>, accessed April 2006.

types include knowledge logs (k-logs), filters, mixed (combination of types), or functions such as retail or advertisement hosting.<sup>43</sup> Others classify blogs as a genre of speech<sup>44</sup> and a social structure dependent on the writers' intentions.<sup>45</sup>

Weblogs first developed between 1994 and 1998, beginning with early adopters of the Internet (generally computer programmers) who created pages of links and commentary. In 1997, Jorn Barger, author of the blog "Robot Wisdom," first used the term "weblog" to refer to his site. In 1999, easy-to-use free software (including Blogger, Pitas, and Groksoup) became available to the general public, democratizing the blogosphere.<sup>46</sup> Though critics such as McChesney caution that the Internet is no more democratizing than passing out a newsletter to one's neighbors, it is precisely the decentralized, personal and particular nature of weblogs that make them so attractive to those who wish to have a hand in creating media.<sup>47</sup>

Rak proposes that weblogs in general have a specific ideology due to their origins as American computer experts' personal sites. They tend to focus on the "primacy of

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<sup>43</sup> Susan C. Herring, Lois Ann Scheidt, Sabrina Bonus, and Elijah Wright, "Bridging the Gap: A Genre Analysis of Weblogs," In Proceedings of the Thirty-seventh Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (Los Alamitos: IEEE Press, January 2004), <http://www.blogninja.com/DDGDD04.doc>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>44</sup> Alireza Doostdar, "'The Vulgar Spirit of Blogging': On Language, Culture, and Power in Persian Weblogestan," *American Anthropologist* 106 no. 4 (December 2004): 654, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>45</sup> Lilia Efimova and Stephanie Hendrick, "In Search for a Virtual Settlement: An Exploration of Weblog Community Boundaries," DocuShare Telematica Instituut, (2004): 2, <https://doc.telin.nl/dscgi/ds.py/Get/File-46041>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>46</sup> Laura J. Gurak and others, "Introduction: Weblogs, Rhetoric, Community, and Culture," in Laura J. Gurak and others, eds., *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community, and Culture of Weblogs* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2004): paragraph 1, <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/introduction.html>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>47</sup> Kristin M. Langellier and Eric E. Peterson, *Storytelling in Daily Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 173.

individual experience”<sup>48</sup> and exhibit a sense of opposition to the established media, extreme individualism, capitalism, and liberalism especially regarding freedom of expression (based on Rousseau’s model of the social contract).<sup>49</sup>

Though all blogs follow a similar format, content is highly varied. Readers and creators of weblogs have a wide range of uses for blogs, a topic currently under investigation in academia. In one of the earlier blog studies, Kaye found that blog readers (at the time mostly young, educated, high-income males) read blogs for the purposes of information seeking and media check, convenience, personal fulfillment, surveillance, expression, and affiliation.<sup>50</sup> A contemporary study of uses and gratifications of personal blog creators found their motivations were documenting life, expressing opinions, having an outlet for emotions and thoughts, testing ideas for an audience, and opening a community forum.<sup>51</sup> While mainstream media hype often portrays the blogosphere as a fast-paced, highly interconnected scene of debate and idea exchange, the majority of blogs are simple diaries or ways to keep in touch with friends and family from the face-to-face world.<sup>52</sup> In this sense, a blog may become a site for the synthesis of “real life”

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<sup>48</sup> Julie Rak, “The Digital Queer: Weblogs and Internet Identity,” *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 166, <http://search.epnet.net>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 166–173.

<sup>50</sup> Barbara Kaye, “It’s a Blog, Blog, Blog World: Users and Uses of Weblogs,” *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 13, no. 2 (2005): 84.

<sup>51</sup> Bonnie A. Nardi, Diane J. Schiano, Michelle Gumbrecht, and Luke Swartz, “Why We Blog,” *Communications of the ACM* 47 no. 12 (December 2004): 42–45.

<sup>52</sup> Graham Lampa, “Imagining the Blogosphere: An Introduction to the Imagined Community of Instant Publishing,” in Laura J. Gurak and others, eds., *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community, and Culture of Weblogs*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2004): paragraphs 1, 9, 10, [http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/imagining\\_the\\_blogosphere.html](http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/imagining_the_blogosphere.html), accessed April 2006.

with an alter ego that exists only in the author's imagination<sup>53</sup> or a way of substituting texts for persons.<sup>54</sup> Lampa found self-publishing on blogs to be a new form of mass ceremony, as reading the morning newspaper was in the past.<sup>55</sup> Some blogs become a conversation medium for a modern version of storytelling.<sup>56</sup> Particularly for adolescent girls, journal-type sites may become an online narrative for expressing oneself to the world.<sup>57</sup> Other uses include educational purposes, online journalism, or knowledge sharing within or between businesses and other organizations.<sup>58</sup> Herring and her research team, through a process of social network analysis, found that most blogs (particularly journal-type blogs) are not densely linked to others. Rather, small clusters are heavily interlinked, while only the most famous "A-list" blogs are truly linked across the blogosphere.<sup>59</sup>

An interesting feature of blogs is their position between interpersonal and mass communication. Though most blogs are intended primarily for an audience of face-to-face acquaintances, by publishing on the web bloggers acknowledge their status as creators of content for public consumption. This may lead to a conflict in the blogger's

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<sup>53</sup> Rak, "The Digital Queer," 167–168.

<sup>54</sup> Reed, "My Blog Is Me, 224, 227.

<sup>55</sup> Lampa, "Imagining the Blogosphere," 13, 20.

<sup>56</sup> Langellier and Peterson, *Storytelling*, 165–175.

<sup>57</sup> Susannah R. Stern, "Virtually Speaking: Girls' Self-disclosure on the WWW," *Women's Studies in Communication* 25 no. 2 (September 2002), <http://rdswel1.rdsinc.com>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>58</sup> Huffaker, "Gender Similarities and Differences," 12–13.

<sup>59</sup> Susan C. Herring and others, "Conversations in the Blogosphere: An Analysis 'From the Bottom Up,'" in *Proceedings of the Thirty-eighth Hawai'i International Conference on System Sciences* (Los Alamitos: IEEE Press, 2005), <http://www.blogninja.com/hicss05.blogconv.pdf>, accessed April 2006.

message: to whom do they write?<sup>60</sup> Many attempt to maintain a balance between writing to please themselves (the identity aspect) and writing to please others (the community aspect).<sup>61</sup> Scheidt examined five audience functions for bloggers: therapist supporting emotions; cultural theorist assessing meanings, values, and identities in the text; narrative analyst examining genre, truth or strategy; and critic appraising the display of performance knowledge and skill.<sup>62</sup> Some bloggers self-censor: relatives and other readers may disapprove of the raw, unedited content bloggers often produce, so many attempt to make it less offensive to preserve face-to-face relationships.<sup>63</sup> Though weblogs are public, they usually have an intimate feel—images of the author at the top of every page, highly revelatory content—that creates a sense of private, one-on-one interaction.<sup>64</sup>

### **Identity in Blogging**

Dimensions of identity are negotiated in blogs as they are in real life. In fact, Langellier and Peterson consider the dominant expression of weblogs to be “the struggle over identities—interpersonal, social, moral, aesthetic—in uncertain and unstable conditions by making that struggle concrete and accessible.”<sup>65</sup> Thus, a blog becomes a

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<sup>60</sup> Denise Seveck Bortree, “Presentation of Self on the Web: An Ethnographic Study of Teenage Girls’ Weblogs,” *Education, Communication & Information* 5, no. 1 (March 2005): 28.

<sup>61</sup> Efimova and Hendrick, “In Search for a Virtual Settlement,” 5.

<sup>62</sup> Lois Ann Scheidt, “Adolescent Diary Weblogs and the Unseen Audience,” in Buckingham, David and Willett, Rebekah, eds., *Digital Generations: Children, Young People and New Media* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006), [http://www.slis.indiana.edu/research/working\\_papers/files/SLISWP-05-01.pdf](http://www.slis.indiana.edu/research/working_papers/files/SLISWP-05-01.pdf), accessed April 2006.

<sup>63</sup> Nardi and others, “Why We Blog,” 43.

<sup>64</sup> Meredith Badger, “Visual Blogs,” in Laura J. Gurak, Smiljana Antonijevic, Laurie Johnson, Clancy Ratliff, and Jessica Reyman, eds., *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community, and Culture of Weblogs*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2004): paragraphs 5–8, [http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/visual\\_blogs.html](http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/visual_blogs.html), accessed April 2006.

<sup>65</sup> Langellier and Peterson, *Storytelling*, 187.

kind of workshop where the various pieces of identity are crafted, fit together, and constantly rearranged to fit the prevailing circumstances. Huffaker questions whether identity in blogs is as changeable as a suit of clothes, as stable as a real-world persona, or a combination of these two extremes. In his study of gender differences in weblog identities among teenagers, he found that few differences exist in the way teenagers present themselves to the world through blogs.<sup>66</sup> In particular, teens tend to use their screen names/blog names as important indicators of identity.<sup>67</sup>

Reed conducted an online and face-to-face ethnography of UK journal bloggers. He proposes, based on his findings, that bloggers explicitly consider the texts of their blogs to be an extension of self; thus the title of his article, “My Blog Is Me.”<sup>68</sup> In his online ethnography of the Iranian blog community (“Weblogestan”), Doostdar discusses the self-presentations of Iranian bloggers revealed in their texts as “linguistic and cultural rebels,” perhaps in direct defiance of the political and cultural environment of contemporary Iran.<sup>69</sup>

Hevem’s study of twenty personal weblogs revealed that time is an important factor in identity construction: as blog formats are based on reverse chronological order, it is possible to trace the development and fluctuations of the author’s identity through the posts. He proposes the metaphor of thread/threading for examining identity in blogs. First, identity construction may be a journey (like the journey of thread through cloth)

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<sup>66</sup> Huffaker, “Gender Similarities and Differences.”

<sup>67</sup> Kaveri Subrahmanyam, Patricia M. Greenfield, and Brendesha Tynes, “Constructing Sexuality and Identity in an Online Teen Chat Room,” *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 25 no.6 (November-December 2004): 651–666.

<sup>68</sup> Reed, “My Blog Is Me,” 224.

<sup>69</sup> Doostdar, “The Vulgar Spirit of Blogging, 653.

through time and narrative encompassing personal experiences and thoughts. Next, it may be spun (as the individual fibers of a thread overlap to create a whole) by changing, overlapping experiences and beliefs as expressed in the blog. Finally, online identity is a woven tapestry carefully (if unconsciously) constructed by the blogger to present a comprehensive image composed of individual elements.<sup>70</sup>

### **Community in Blogging**

Based on Jones' concept of the virtual settlement (see above), Blanchard conducted a case study of "The Julie/Julia Project," a popular blog focused on cooking, to determine if it was a virtual community or merely a group. She found that having large numbers of readers alone does not create a sense of community; rather, it depends on the level of interaction with other features such as blogrolls, comments, and guestbooks. Readers who participated in these parts of the blog expressed a sense of community; those who did not participate did not express this sense.<sup>71</sup> Marlow considers the blogosphere to consist of a number of smaller communities, each with similar social structures based on authority as in face-to-face communities.<sup>72</sup>

In her study of a blogging community based on knitting, Wei found that bloggings (one type of online community) tend to form around common interests or characteristics. Members typically have shared value systems as well as interests, leading to a "culture" with specific norms that must be followed for successful integration into the

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<sup>70</sup> Vincent W. Hevem, "Threaded Identity in Cyberspace: Weblogs and Positioning in the Dialogical Self," *Identity* 4, no. 4 (October 2004): 321–335.

<sup>71</sup> Anita Lynn Blanchard, "Blogs as Virtual Communities: Identifying a Sense of Community in the *Julie/Julia Project*," in Laura J. Gurak and others, eds., *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community, and Culture of Weblogs*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2004); paragraphs 17–26, [http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/blogs\\_as\\_virtual.html](http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/blogs_as_virtual.html), accessed April 2006.

<sup>72</sup> Marlow, "Audience, Structure, and Authority," paragraphs 1–3.



community.<sup>73</sup> Using the metaphor of neighborhoods, Efimova and Hendrick found great variation in the use of shared spaces in the blogosphere. For example, the knitting community (above) had lively and active public discourse, while others appeared to be mere collections of buildings without interaction. However, closer examination revealed more subtle patterns of community interaction in the quieter communities; much one-to-one communication took place (through email, for example) based on the overall group communication.<sup>74</sup>

As a blogging community grows (based around bloggings, links, or blogrolls) interactions between members tend to increase substantially over time. Reed found that after several months of knowing each other online, one UK blogging community initiated face-to-face meetings. Because these bloggers equate their blogs with their selves, the meetings were considered simply extensions of the blogging community: a meeting of old friends rather than complete strangers.<sup>75</sup>

Blogging may offer specific benefits to communities on the fringes of the dominant culture by giving members forums in which to chronicle and synthesize life experiences, resist conforming to mainstream culture, and conquer social isolation.<sup>76</sup> However, Zdenek argues that this “liberatory perspective” is merely an unrealistic ideal; rather, the language of blogs and other forms of CMC serve to reinforce roles and stereotypes present in other forms of communication. This is particularly a problem for women, who

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<sup>73</sup> Carolyn Wei, “Formation of Norms in a Blog Community,” in Laura J. Gurak and others, eds., *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community, and Culture of Weblogs*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2004): [http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/formation\\_of\\_norms.html](http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/formation_of_norms.html), accessed April 2006.

<sup>74</sup> Efimova and Hendrick, “In Search For a Virtual Settlement.”

<sup>75</sup> Reed, “My Blog Is Me,” 234–235.

<sup>76</sup> Langellier and Peterson, *Storytelling*, 183.

face magnified problems of silencing or attack in cyberspace.<sup>77</sup> The Internet in general has been called “the ultimate act of intellectual colonialism” due to its primary use of English and other American-based standards. However, while the Internet may exacerbate societal inequalities, it may also serve to change the existing structures that create these inequalities.<sup>78</sup>

### **MMENA Women: Identity and Community**

Immigration from North Africa and the Middle East to the United States first began in the late 1800s. This “first wave” of immigration consisted mainly of Christians from then-Syria: present day Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Israel, and Jordan. This group assimilated quickly into the larger society while maintaining their religious theology, child-rearing practices, food, and family ties, though they did not pass on the knowledge of Arabic to their children. After World War II the “second wave” began. These newcomers were from across the region and had a politicized Arab consciousness, particularly after the Six-Day War of 1967. Unlike the initial arrivals, these immigrants were primarily Muslim.<sup>79</sup> Due to the increased atmosphere of ethnic freedom created by the civil rights movement, they were less afraid of openly expressing their ethnic and cultural heritage. This group influenced the earlier wave of immigrants by increasing their awareness of issues in the Middle East and North Africa, particularly in Palestine. However, since the events of September 11, 2001, many MMENA Americans fear

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<sup>77</sup> Sean Zdenek, “Rising up from the MUD: Inscribing Gender in Software Design,” *Discourse and Society* 10 no. 3 (1999): 379–409.

<sup>78</sup> Mark Warschauer, “Language, Identity, and the Internet,” *Mots Pluriels* 19 (October 2001), 5, <http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels/MP1901mw.html>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>79</sup> Linda P. Morton, “Segmenting Publics: Segment to Target Arab Americans,” *Public Relations Quarterly* 46 no. 4 (Winter 2001): 47–48, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

speaking out against American policies because of stereotypes currently implicit in their ethnicity. They often report experiencing a “paradox of identity”:<sup>80</sup> being ethnically and culturally identified with “the enemy” while being American citizens or residents as well.<sup>81</sup>

Ashcroft and Ahluwalia expanded on the paradox of identity concept in their description of Palestinian cultural theorist Edward Said’s work. Exiles, as many MMENA Americans could be considered, are aware of at least two cultures while most people only are familiar with one. The “plurality of vision” this knowledge provides leads to an awareness of different, often conflicting dimensions of culture. Identity is deeply affected by the conflicts, or as Said describes it, is a “constant contest between cultures.” One’s identity must be spoken to be claimed, Said asserted, and in the case of MMENA Americans, their identifying narratives often cannot be heard. They are overtaken by political issues, cultural stereotypes, and misunderstandings.<sup>82</sup>

Read found that compared to the US adult population as a whole, MENA Americans are younger, better educated, and have higher incomes. Over half were born in the United States; one-third are Muslim. They are not a homogenous group with a monolithic culture, though some similarities do exist. The degree of patriarchal societal structure and gender role differentiation usually depend on social class, length of time in the United States, and country of origin. MMENA Americans tend to be more lenient

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<sup>80</sup> Steven Salaita, “Ethnic Identity and Imperative Patriotism: Arab Americans Before and After 9/11,” *College Literature* 32 no. 2 (Spring 2005): 153, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 146–168.

<sup>82</sup> Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia, *Edward Said: The Paradox of Identity* (London, New York: Routledge, 1999), 9–29.

with traditional values than their counterparts in their homelands, including allowing women to pray in the mosques.<sup>83</sup>

Shain calls MMENA Americans a “mobilized diaspora” with two major concerns in the U.S.: the status of MMENA Americans in politics and society and relations between the U.S. and the Arab world.<sup>84</sup> Nagel and Staheli note that although many are involved in organizations like the American-Arab Anti-discrimination Committee and the Arab American Institute that promote ethnically related causes, many are also transnational: claiming U.S. citizen identity but maintaining ties with the homeland. These individuals exhibit expressions of difference as well as social membership in American society. They explain, “We suggest . . . that it is possible to claim identity as a citizen of a country and to negotiate membership within the bounds of ‘belonging’, even without claiming to ‘be of’ that country.”<sup>85</sup> This is evidenced in labels individuals choose to identify themselves: Arab, Arab-American, American, Lebanese, Palestinian, Copt, Egyptian, Muslim, or others.<sup>86</sup> Haddad notes that with changing political and cultural landscapes, the different generations of MMENA background Americans may identify themselves differently. Children born in America to parents who immigrated may

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<sup>83</sup> Je’nan Ghazal Read, *Culture, Class, and Work among Arab-American Women* (New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC, 2004), 15.

<sup>84</sup> Yossi Shain, “Arab-Americans at a Crossroads,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25, no. 3 (Spring 1996): 47–49, <http://jstor.org>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>85</sup> Caroline R. Nagel and Lynn A. Staheli, “Citizenship, Identity and Transnational Migration: Arab Immigrants to the United States,” *Space and Polity* 8 no. 1 (April 2004): 3, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>86</sup> Salaita, “Ethnic Identity and Imperative Patriotism,” 163.

struggle with reconciling their parents' culture and religion to that of the society in which they grew up.<sup>87</sup>

Palestinian women living in Canada report that their Muslim identity rather than their ethnicity became more salient after September 11, 2001. Cultural and religious practices such as wearing the hijab or delineating gender boundaries that were not observed in Palestine became important parts of life in Canada. Religious education for women, considered superfluous in Palestine, became a way to protect family and culture against a dangerous society. Endogamy was expected, whether within the Palestinian community or simply within the larger Muslim community.<sup>88</sup> Cainkar found similar practices in the U.S. Palestinian community, with the addition that social class played a major role in the degree to which women promoted traditional culture, with more affluent women exhibiting less traditional behaviors.<sup>89</sup> Similarly, Husain and O'Brien found that most Muslims in the UK identify as "British Muslim" rather than using national origin as a primary characteristic of identity. Women in this community use the hijab and segregation of the genders to express resistance against Western dominance.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, *Not Quite American? The Shaping of Arab and Muslim Identity in the United States* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2004), 51.

<sup>88</sup> Camilla Gibb and Celia Rothenberg, "Believing Women: Harari and Palestinian Women at Home and in the Canadian Diaspora," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 20 no. 2 (2000): 243–259.

<sup>89</sup> Louise Cainkar, "Palestinian Women in American Society," in McCarus, Ernest, ed. *The Development of Arab-American Identity* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 86–105.

<sup>90</sup> Fatima Husain and Margaret O'Brien, "Muslim Communities in Europe: Reconstruction and Transformation," *Current Sociology* 48, no. 4 (October 2000): 1–13, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

Michael notes that people often see themselves according to whichever facet of their identity is under attack.<sup>91</sup> Aoude adds that identity is always a composite of multiple identities, particularly for groups in diaspora.<sup>92</sup> MMENA women, “located at the intersection of ethnic, religious, and gender politics,”<sup>93</sup> often place more significance in their Muslim identities while in the West than they did in their home countries. Some feel that religious identity is the only available option because cultural identity can only exist in the physical context of the homeland.<sup>94</sup> Khan explores the idea of MMENA women living in a “third space” between identities, a “politicized, creative, in-between, fluid space”<sup>95</sup> where identities are continually negotiated. Ajrouch proposes that MMENA women bear a particular burden in comparison to men:

There are indications...that because the males are urged to realize the American dream of financial success, the cultural meaning of an Arab ethnic identity is increasingly located in the behavior of the females. Overall, males are experiencing a loosening of cultural constraints from their family and community, whereas females experience perhaps even more restrictions on their behavior. This gendered division of expectations leads the community to rely on females for the maintenance of tradition and the perpetuation of an Arab identity.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> John Michael, “Beyond Us and Them: Identity and Terror from an Arab American’s Perspective,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 102 no. 4 (2003): 700–728, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>92</sup> Ibrahim G. Aoude, “Maintaining Culture, Reclaiming Identity: Palestinian Lives in the Diaspora,” *Asian Studies Review* 25 no. 2 (June 2001): 153–167, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>93</sup> Susan E. Marshall and Jen’nan Ghazal Read, “Identity Politics Among Arab-American Women,” *Social Science Quarterly* 84 no. 4 (December 2003): 875–891, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>94</sup> Shahnaz Khan, *Muslim Women: Crafting a North American Identity* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2000), 119.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>96</sup> Kristine J. Ajrouch, “Place, Age, and Culture: Community Living and Ethnic Identity Among Lebanese American Adolescents,” *Small Group Research* 31 no. 4 (August 2000): 453, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

Ahmed explored the contrast between women's orality and male-created and perpetuated text in the Arabic-speaking world. In the strictly segregated societies of Egypt and the Gulf countries, separate interpretations of culture, Islam, and morality developed in the women's world of spoken, colloquial Arabic and the men's sphere of written Arabic and medieval, male-produced texts. With the increase of Arabic literacy in these countries, Ahmed suggests, the gentler women's outlook on life could be lost. She called for opportunities for oral culture, in the past the province of women, to be maintained.<sup>97</sup>

Mandaville identifies the Internet as an area where MMENA identities are "continually constructed, debated and reimagined."<sup>98</sup> He notes that the younger generation of Muslims in the diaspora has a consciousness of the *ummah* (worldwide community of Muslims) that often transcends national borders. The Internet provides a space where they can negotiate between the various facets of their identities and communities in concert with others in similar positions around the world.<sup>99</sup> In a rare study of Muslim women and Internet use, Bastani describes the functions of the "Muslim Women Network," an email discussion group for Muslim women around the world. She found that the women involved used the discussion group as a way to make face-to-face

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<sup>97</sup> Leila Ahmed, *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—A Woman's Journey* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999), 276–291.

<sup>98</sup> Peter Mandaville, "Reimagining Islam in Diaspora: the Politics of Mediated Community," *Gazette* 63, no. 2–3 (2001): 169, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 183–184.

connections with other Muslims outside their home countries, as a support network, and as a discussion forum for issues related to living in a non-Muslim society.<sup>100</sup>

### **The Need for This Study**

St. Amant called for “international digital studies,” the intersection of CMC and intercultural communication research, citing the increasingly computer-dependent, globalized business world as an area where daily miscommunication occurs. He noted that in CMC identity is generally fluid and without face-to-face cues: an individual online can become whomever she wishes or may inadvertently be perceived by those she communicates with as totally different from how she perceives herself. However, as Ting-Toomey stated, much successful intercultural communication depends on a stable identity and familiar environment. Solid identity normally determines membership in an in-group: the community or in-group is in many cultures based on context, reciprocity, trust in another’s identity, and non-verbal cues. The contention between practical aspects of identity in these systems of communication may lead to misunderstandings with consequences for both businesses and individuals. Therefore, St. Amant suggested, research should be conducted that considers the differing functions of identity in CMC and intercultural communication.<sup>101</sup>

Studies have not yet been conducted to examine the blogging behavior of specific ethnic groups, as most blog community studies focus on interest or culture groups.

Additionally, little research has addressed MMENA women’s use or creation of media.

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<sup>100</sup> Susan Bastani, “Muslim Women On-line.” *The Arab World Geographer/Le Géographe du monde arabe* 3 no. 1 (2000): 52–57.

<sup>101</sup> Kirk St. Amant, “When Cultures and Computers Collide: Rethinking Computer-Mediated Communication According to International and Intercultural Communication Expectations,” *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 16, no. 2 (April 2002): 196–214, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.



No previous studies have focused on the blogs of MMENA women. In fact, little research has attended to the communication behaviors of MMENA women in any context.

Scholars have called for a continued examination of blogs as they grow in popularity,<sup>102</sup> study of identity negotiation through blogs,<sup>103</sup> and examination of new forms of virtual community.<sup>104</sup> This study will be helpful by exploring these areas of documented need as well as expanding understanding of MMENA women and their intercultural communication in general.

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<sup>102</sup> Nardi et al, "Why We Blog," 46.

<sup>103</sup> Hevem, "Threaded Identity in Cyberspace," 323.

<sup>104</sup> Papacharissi, "The Presentation of Self in Virtual Life," 657.

## CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHOD

One of the major areas of computer-mediated communication research is “social interaction and the presentation of self online.”<sup>1</sup> Online communication within communities generally “enables users to freely express emotions and reach a high level of self-disclosure.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, online communities may offer a unique forum for concentrated exploration of issues of identity and community.

Qualitative research is particularly well suited to such research because it provides “fine-grained data about an often-mystified social phenomenon.”<sup>3</sup> Current studies of computer-mediated communication, particularly blogging, generally employ one of a limited number of methods. Quantitative studies tend to rely on content analysis<sup>4</sup> of blog entries<sup>5</sup> or survey data from blog authors<sup>6</sup> or readers. Qualitative studies popularly use

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Mann and Fiona Stewart, *Internet Communication and Qualitative Research: A Handbook for Researching Online* (London: Sage Publications, 2000), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Liav Sade-Beck, “Internet Ethnography: Online and Offline,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 3 no. 2 (2004): 4, [http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/3\\_2/pdf/sadebeck.pdf](http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/3_2/pdf/sadebeck.pdf), accessed April 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas R. Lindlof and Brian C. Taylor, *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002), 253.

<sup>4</sup> Susan C. Herring, Lois Ann Scheidt, Sabrina Bonus, and Elijah Wright, “Bridging the Gap: A Genre Analysis of Weblogs,” In Proceedings of the Thirty-seventh Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (Los Alamitos: IEEE Press, January 2004), <http://www.blogninja.com/DDGDD04.doc>, accessed April 2006..

<sup>5</sup> Judit Bar-Ilan, “An Outsider’s View on “Topic-oriented blogging,”” In 13th World Wide Web Conference. New York: The International World Wide Web Conference Committee (IW3C2) and the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM), (2004). <http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/1013367.1013373>, accessed April 2006.

either discourse analysis<sup>7</sup> or ethnographic methods such as observation<sup>8</sup> and/or in-depth interviews either face-to-face<sup>9</sup> or online.<sup>10</sup>

In this project, I employed qualitative methods in a study of a group of Muslim women of Middle Eastern and North African (MMENA) descent to describe how they used blogging in identity and community construction. I gathered a wide range of data including text from blog entries, page formats, images, and audio as well as comments from other bloggers. Then, I conducted in-depth analysis on the creations of a select number of bloggers. To ensure naturalistic inquiry, all data collection remained a function of computer-mediated communication.<sup>11</sup> Researcher reflexivity was incorporated into the study<sup>12</sup> through the use of my personal blog to enable me to understand the experience of being a blogger.<sup>13</sup> I also maintained extensive research notes throughout the data collection and analysis phases, which are discussed in chapter four. Member checks were

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<sup>6</sup> Barbara Kaye, "It's a Blog, Blog, Blog World: Users and Uses of Weblogs," *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 13, no. 2 (2005): 73–95, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Alessandra Talamo and Beatrice Ligorio, "Strategic Identities in Cyberspace," *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 4, no. 1 (2001): 109–122, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Vincent W. Hevem, "Threaded Identity in Cyberspace: Weblogs and Positioning in the Dialogical Self," *Identity* 4, no. 4 (October 2004): 321–335, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Adam Reed, "'My Blog Is Me': Texts and Persons in UK Online Journal Culture (and anthropology)," *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 70, no. 2 (June 2005): 226, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Denise Sevick Bortree, "Presentation of Self on the Web: An Ethnographic Study of Teenage Girls' Weblogs," *Education, Communication & Information* 5, no. 1 (March 2005): 25–39.

<sup>11</sup> Lindlof and Taylor, *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*, 267–268.

<sup>12</sup> Ruth DeSouza, "Motherhood, Migration and Methodology: Giving Voice to the 'Other,'" *The Qualitative Report* 9 no. 3 (2004): 463–482, <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR9-3/desouza.pdf>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Alireza Doostdar, "'The Vulgar Spirit of Blogging': On Language, Culture, and Power in Persian Weblogistan," *American Anthropologist* 106 no. 4 (December 2004): 652–653, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

conducted electronically after the analysis and draft of the report. This design attempted to conform to accepted standards of quality in qualitative research based on guidelines suggested by Jones<sup>14</sup> and Creswell.<sup>15</sup>

Prior to conducting the study or finalizing the research design, I conducted an in-depth interview with a female blogger of similar background to determine if issues of identity and community were likely relevant to MMENA bloggers. The interview confirmed some topics as possibly important, raised some new to me, and prompted reconsideration of other issues. Though data from the interview was not be used in this study, offline explorations of the topic under study serve to enrich understanding and later analysis as suggested by Sade-Beck.<sup>16</sup>

To select participants in the study, I first examined two bloggings for Muslim women from the Xanga blogging service: The “Hijab: The Holiest Hat of Them All”<sup>17</sup> blogging with 416 members and the “Niqabi Sisters”<sup>18</sup> blogging with 31 members. Bloggings are optional and generally are based around some form of self-identification such as gender, religion, hobbies, or political orientation. Choosing participants from bloggings for Muslim women ensured that the participants self-identified as Muslim. I used criterion sampling to select participants based on factors such as ethnicity, posting

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<sup>14</sup> Kip Jones, “Mission Drift in Qualitative Research, or Moving Toward a Systematic Review of Qualitative Studies, Moving Back to a More Systematic Narrative Review,” *The Qualitative Report* 9, no. 1 (March 2004): 95–112, <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR9-1/jones.pdf>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>15</sup> John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 193–218.

<sup>16</sup> Sade-Beck, “Internet Ethnography,” 12–13.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.xanga.com/groups/group.aspx?id=50775>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.xanga.com/groups/group.aspx?id=374740>, accessed April 2006.

frequency, age, content of posts, and level of interaction with other blogs. The ideal participant was one who posted at least weekly on her blog, maintained a blog for three months or more, was over 18 years of age, posted text with content of some depth, and interacted with other bloggers through comments or chat. Selection was an emergent process, as specific markers of these criteria were not known at the outset.<sup>19</sup> While posting frequency and length of time blogging were easily determined by the dates on the blogs, the other criteria took time to discern. Some bloggers included their entire birthdates; others' ages were determined by their enrollment in college or in posts about birthday celebrations. Depth of content and interactions with other bloggers was discovered by reading several months of posts as well as the comment sections of the blogs. In some cases, I also read blogs on which the blogger in question posted.

After reading all the active blogs from the two bloggings mentioned above, I found only two blogs that met the criteria. I subsequently broadened my search to other bloggings working from links on the blogs already selected. These led me to choose bloggers who were members of a Muslim Student Organization blogging, an Egyptian blogging, and a MMENA blogging titled "Arab-American Palace." Throughout the search, I read approximately three hundred blogs. I selected seven blogs for in-depth analysis, based on the criteria above, and working to reach saturation. I also looked for disconfirming cases, and as described in the next chapter, two of the bloggers differed greatly from the others in several aspects of identity and community formation.

Because blogs are public documents that their authors have not opted to make private (through available options such as password protection, for example), the first

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<sup>19</sup> Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 118–120.

stage of this research was conducted as a “lurker.” After selecting the seven blogs for analysis, I saved the entire contents of the blog to editable PDF files in the Webstractor Internet capture program. This yielded over 400 PDF pages of data. I used open coding to complete initial analysis of the information.<sup>20</sup> The codes were entered, using the computer program, directly onto the data in a highlighted text. From this, I created interview questions for each blogger based on specific information within their blogs. Next I attempted to recruit participants for interviews by posting an invitation on their blogs using my own blogging identity. I referred them to my own blog to establish my credibility as a member of the larger blogging community<sup>21</sup> and to further explain the study.<sup>22</sup> My blog<sup>23</sup> contained a short overview of the study, the informed consent document approved by the IRB, and a brief biography of me that explained why I was interested in this topic.

None of the bloggers invited to participate accepted the invitation. For two weeks, all of my posts were ignored. Then one of the bloggers, who was linked to three of the others, posted a comment. She wrote that my post on her blog, as it did not relate to what she had written about the death of a friend, deeply offended her. I immediately offered an apology through a private email, which she accepted. She wished me luck in the study but refused to be interviewed. On her blog, my post was deleted. It seems that my insensitivity to her post was exacerbated by my being a stranger to her. I noticed that

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 56–57.

<sup>21</sup> Denise Sevick Bortree, personal communication, October 6, 2005. (This information was removed from her original article due to space limitations.)

<sup>22</sup> Lindlof and Taylor, *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*, 272.

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.xanga.com/ashleysinkUF>, accessed April 2006.

several other of the comments on the same post were unrelated to hers. In those cases, however, she simply posted comments on their sites that explained her friend's death and asked them to re-read her post. This episode shook me greatly, and I reconsidered the entire study, as my intentions were in no way to harm the women.

While I intended for the two methods of data collection (textual analysis and interviews) to serve as triangulation to ensure research quality and meaningful interpretation, the text of the blogs themselves yielded a wealth of information that answered my research question. Upon the advice of my supervisory committee, I continued the study as a textual analysis. At this time, I collapsed the original categories into more succinct ones. I worked with the categories extensively to determine which were important and how they all fit together. I used concept mapping to help visually outline the connections between the different categories.

During the analysis stage, one of the seven bloggers removed her old posts from the Internet. She maintained her profile page and guest book but had no posts. I contacted her through the guest book but received no reply. Since she, for some reason, desired to have her old posts private, I did not include her blog in the study. I do not feel that this compromised the study, as her blog further confirmed the findings related below.

While completing the research report, approximately two months after my initial invitations to participate in the study, I received a response from one of the bloggers. She said she wanted to participate and asked me to post on her blog. However, she did not respond after this. After the analysis and report of findings were complete, I posted a three-page summary of the major themes of the findings on my blog. The entry was protected so that only the bloggers I designated (those whose blogs were included in the

study) were able to access it. I contacted four of the bloggers using the email links on their blogs and posted a comment on one blog. I discovered that one of the blogs had been closed down by its author at this point and was thus unable to contact this author. Upon the writing of this report, I received responses from one of the bloggers. Her comments are incorporated, with her permission, into the end of chapter four.<sup>24</sup> None of the other bloggers had responded to the request for member checks by the conclusion of the writing of this report.

Using the webpage capture program, copies of each blog under study were saved in PDF format upon each update by the blog author. These files remained on my computer, which was password protected, for the duration of the study. Backup copies of these files were saved on an external hard drive and CDs.

As the Internet is a relatively new arena of research, ethical guidelines for researchers are under debate.<sup>25</sup> I viewed the bloggers as private individuals creating public documents and requiring care and consideration. Therefore, no distinguishing information such as real names, photos, email addresses, exact place of residence, or screen name was included in the study. The names used to refer to them in the following chapters are pseudonyms only.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>26</sup> Amy Bruckman, "Studying the Amateur Artist: A Perspective on Disguising Data Collected in Human Subjects Research on the Internet," *Ethics and Information Technology* 4 no. 3 (2002): paragraph 90–99, [http://www.nyu.edu/projects/nissenbaum/ethics\\_bruckman.html](http://www.nyu.edu/projects/nissenbaum/ethics_bruckman.html), accessed April 2006.



## CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

### **Identity**

I always thought it was confusing to decide whether I was American or Egyptian, but I see the same replicating in every aspect of my life--culture, identity, religion, marriage, race, class, ethnicity, heritage--, in everything basically. I always wondered if there were others out there who felt that way about being Middle Eastern or Egyptian or from Egypt or spoke Arabic or considered themselves Arab and were brought up in the United States...Am I becoming a bi-product of two different world's I have lived in thus far and has my habitus influenced me so greatly that I have given up on traditions and institutions within both spectrum? Or am I just realizing that the epitomy of my loneliness comes from my confusion, or ill-fate of realization? Does anyone understand?

Thus wrote Emster, a MMENA blogger, while wrestling with defining her identity in the interstitial space between MMENA and American life. Like the other bloggers in this study, Emster found herself torn between two worlds, neither of which was completely comfortable on its own.

In her theory of identity negotiation, Ting-Toomey outlined primary dimensions of identity that are not situationally dependent: cultural, ethnic, gender, and personal identities. Within these dimensions of identity, the MMENA bloggers in this study displayed a “paradox of identity,” conflict between the various aspects of who they are. Their blog entries reflected the tension between having MMENA heritage in the context of being citizens or residents in the United States. The following chapter describes the bloggers’ identity formation in terms of personal, gender, and cultural/ethnic identity as well as the intersections of the various dimensions of these identities.

### **Personal Identity**

Each of the bloggers displayed her personal identity in part through the layout and graphics of her blog, the images she chose to represent herself, the groups she identified with, and the stated description in the “About Me” profile section. The careful, if unconscious, choices made in each of these areas, as well as in the texts of the posts themselves, reflect constantly negotiated aspects of identity. In the following section each of the bloggers in the study are described in context of their blog appearance, their profile pictures, their membership in bloggings, and their introductory text.

**Queen Leila.** Twenty-four-year-old Queen Leila of California authored the longest-running blog in the study, with almost three years of regular posts. She described herself primarily as Muslim, Egyptian, and Californian. She graduated from college in 2005 and at the time of this study, worked full time. After several months of blogging in standard English, Queen Leila inexplicably changed her writing style to an alternative phonetic spelling of English. Her posts, comments, and captions were consistently written in this style, even if she posted on others’ blogs. Perhaps because of her long-standing presence in the blogging community, she was something of a leader among other bloggers, bringing newcomers to the forefront and starting conversations in which many others were involved.

Perhaps the most salient aspect of Queen Leila’s personal identity was her religion. She wore hijab and used her picture as her profile avatar. It was a face shot, in low light with a neutral background; she was looking sideways without smiling, her hand clutching her hijab near her face. Each of her posts began with “in the name of Allah, the gracious, the merciful,” in Arabic transcription (using English letters) followed by the English

translation. On Muslim holidays or during Ramadan, she included more elaborate Arabic translations, usually from the Qur'an.

Generally, the look of her blog reflected whatever event or concern was dominant in her writing at the time. She adjusted the layout and background frequently. For example, on her birthday, she posted a "happy birthday" graphic behind the text on each page. For the new year, she included a scrolling bar of favorite photos from the past year: her college graduation, a graphic incorporating her face and her name, Iraqi and Palestinian flags, her favorite celebrity who died, the Kaaba [holiest site of Islam], and Arabic calligraphy. Between the two rows of images a title read, "Happy New Year, New Beginnings, New Memories."

Her bloggings, listed on the side of every page, were primarily concerned with Muslim or Arab identity. She was also a member of the group "DAYM—Im really goodlooking—don't hate!!" as well as "Aspiring Young Entrepreneurs."

In her public profile, which is on the left side of every page of the blog, Queen Leila listed several of her interests: "Islam (my life), religions, Arab issuez (Free Palestine), current eventz (get outta Iraq), politicz, history, languagez, help'n othaz, food, travel, read'n/write'n, poetry, music, dance, work'n out, moviez, laugh'n, computaz, fun!" The blog template offered an area to include the blogger's expertise; and Queen Leila listed hers: "Now lets update this thing 4 Ramadan Insha'Allah... I'm an expert at be'n da loud n proud Muslimah who happenz 2 be Egyptian Californian enjoy'n da royaltiez of be'n da Queen... but don't bow down 2 me, bow down 2 Allah (swt)!"

**VirtueOne.** An architecture student in a California university, VirtueOne was recently engaged. She had been blogging for approximately one year at the time of this

study. Like Queen Leila, VirtueOne put her religious identity at the forefront. She also wore hijab and used Arabic calligraphy from the Qur'an as the heading of the blog. In her black-and-white profile picture, she was smiling and looking directly into the camera. During the year she maintained the blog, she changed her background only once. This change was from a standard template to a custom dark blue night sky with clouds and stars.

Her bloggings were mostly related to being Muslim or Arab and supporting Palestine. One was related to architecture, another to "Arab/Hispanic Mix." She states her interests briefly: "Architecture, Art, Islam, Randomness, You, Me, Drawing, Coffee!! Shey!! [tea] Anything appealing," and her expertise simply as "Architect Design."

**Ladyras.** Ladyras was a college sophomore in New Jersey. At the time of this study, she had been posting on her blog for approximately eleven months. Her blog title reads in at the top right: "Je suis prêt" and at the left, the translation: "I am ready." She did not include a picture of herself on the blog. When she first began posting, she included a great deal of personal information such as her ethnic heritage, interests, education, and a photo. A few weeks later, she made several posts about technical problems with posting images. After several months, she decided that the blog would be anonymous and would never include her picture. At this time, she began her own blogging ("DAYM—Im really goodlooking—don't hate!!") and posted frequently about how attractive she is. Her background was solid pink and stable throughout the life of the blog. She included the results of several online quizzes, such as "Which celebrity wants to sleep with you." Her bloggings focused on ethnic or geographical pride: Puerto Rican, Arab, New York, and Jersey. She was also, of course, a member of the one she began.

In one of her earliest posts, she wrote a detailed description of herself:

i graduated highschool in '02, took a year off did my thing and now im ALMOST a sophomre in college (i kinda fcked up my grades last semester). Ima smart motivated female who dont like to take no shit from anyone...I've been in love once and had my heart broke more than i can count lol ima booty driver, i hit the curb on turns, press on the breaks too fast, my ghetto ass hoopride is banged up ont he passenger side cuz some dumb bitch ran a stop sign and hit me from the side!!!! anyways...ill get funky wit THAT some other time....I love sleeping :) i work 2 jobs, go to school full time, go out (i like gin 2 bars and messin wit the weird messed up people)...

On her profile page, in the “about me” section, she wrote, “Tell me who i have to be....to get some RECIPROCITY.” Her stated interest was in a brand of perfume: “THAT JUNK SMELLS SO GOOD-TOUCH OF PINK MMMMMMMM” while her expertise revealed a little of her personality: “im not really an expert at anything...that's probably why i got so much to say about everything...people who don't know anything have mad shit to say about everythign..but at least i admit it ;)”

**Emster.** Emster, from Minnesota, was a graduate student at the University of Cairo in Egypt. Part of her blog was written while she lived in the United States and part during her time in Cairo. She was studying sociology, teaching classes, and attempting to start a business in her free time. Rather than choosing a picture of herself individually, she posted a photograph of herself with three family members as her profile image. Unlike the other bloggers in the study, she did not use custom templates or animated text on her blog; it was simply one of the standard templates available from the blogging service. Her bloggings related to being Egyptian, Arab, African, and expatriate as well as one from her undergraduate university.

In her profile “about me” section, she included information on her background and future plans, as well as more abstract musings: “Random thoughts, unexpected situations, and moments of total and happy foolishness are what this experience has taught me... My

random ramblings consist of random events and moments that fall upon me, literally, abroad...Read on; the entries you find in here should have been put together ages ago. If you get tangled in the wording, I'll just try my hardest to explain.” Her interests were: “Hmm...good question. I could write your typical five verbs in here and run off, but I've decided on seven instead: camping, hiking, event planning, languages, traveling to random places, collecting blades of grass from different places, and, of course, people.”

**Zeina.** Zeina graduated from a Texas university in 2005. She had been blogging for a year and maintains a video blog as well as her text blog. She began to write upon returning from a semester of study abroad in Egypt, which she considers her home country. Upon graduation, her parents gave her a trip to Cairo for a few months. Thus, while the bulk of her blog was written from Texas, part was also written from Cairo. She frequently posted pictures of herself and her adventures for her family and friends scattered around the world. The top banner of the site was a montage of pictures of herself (as a child in an Egyptian costume, with friends, at Egyptian ruins, in Alexandria) overlaid with her name in Arabic and the title “my random thoughts...” Her profile picture was of a woman’s hand intricately decorated with henna (Figure 1). The blog background was a black-and-white photo of downtown Cairo around the Nile. The title was “Egyptian Wanderer” and included a quote on freedom by Virginia Woolf. Her bloggings were related to her Texas and Egyptian universities, being Egyptian or Arab, speaking French, and the Muslim Student Organization.



Figure 1. Zeina's profile image.

Zeina stated her interests as, “Well I like soccer, warm fresh bread, Egypt, France, Azza Fahmy, my friends, raquetball, tennis, going out to cafes, meeting cool people, watching movies, smoking shishah, El-Fishawy, AUC [American University of Cairo], languages, the WHO [World Health Organization], music, and my family (and probably a lot of other stuff too).” Her expertise was “being random, missing Egypt, and having fun...” As she stated in her profile and in blog texts, she hoped to enter medical school and one day become a doctor.

**Princess of Arabia.** Princess of Arabia, a recent high school graduate, has maintained her blog for one year and nine months. In her profile picture she wore Western clothes and posed for the camera with her arms in the air, looking sideways and smiling. The title bar of the blog read: “Yeah I'm yo shorty boy...but u already know.” All of her blogrings were related to being Arab, Arab-American, or Muslim, with one specifically for Iraqis. Her stated interests were “paintballing, shopping, dancing, tennis, just having fun :-).” In her profile, she included a statement “About Me:” “what is there to say about me..i'll just start with the basics..im 18,im arab, i go to pierce college..ick..im a pretty kick back person always here for people always makin ppl smile

:-) anythin else u wanna know about me just ask.” Like several of the other bloggers in this study, Princess of Arabia included personal information such as her email address, chat screen name, birthday, and full name on her profile page.

### **Gender Identity**

As popular culture discusses the role of women in Muslim societies, MMENA bloggers deal with their places as women at the intersection of MMENA heritage and the realities of life in the United States.

Princess of Arabia used an image from Disney’s *Aladdin* for the background of her blog (Figure 2). In including this picture and using the name “Princess of Arabia” she was identifying herself with the traditional understandings of womanhood in her cultural heritage, albeit through Western eyes. Princess Jasmine, the “Arabian Princess” her name emulates, was the beautiful and headstrong daughter of an Arabian sultan who fell in love with Aladdin, a poor yet worthy street boy of the kingdom. Jasmine defied the law and her father to be with Aladdin, who offered freedom—her greatest desire. Princess of Arabia expressed her desire to be beautiful, exotic, and independent like Jasmine and, like Jasmine, expected to find her escape through a relationship with a man. Her gender identity resided at the intersection of Western values of freedom and independence and her understanding of her heritage. Interestingly, *Aladdin* was strongly criticized for perpetuating stereotypes of the Middle East. Princess of Arabia, however, did not seem to recognize the stereotypes and fully affirmed her affinity to the film’s depiction of an “Arabian” woman.





Figure 2. Princess of Arabia's profile image.

Zeina defined herself as a “good girl,” her ideal for all MMENA women. “A good girl,” she wrote, “is fun, smart, likes sports, can cook, is religious, NOT a drama queen, and pretty. What more could a guy possibly ask for?” Her description combined traditional expectations for women (homemaking skills, religion, education, appearance) as well as modern American expectations for the ideal woman (fun and likes sports).

In their blogs, these MMENA women negotiated the meaning of a woman's place. In most cases, their families and their interpretations of Islam suggested one set of ideals for a woman, while the dominant culture they live in suggested another. The women wrote about being caught in between, even of conflicts directly related to the contrast between family expectations and their own desires. Gender identity was expressed in three broad areas: gender as related to religion, to family, and to marriage and romantic relationships.

### **Women's roles in religion**

Queen Leila, one of the more religious bloggers, referred to gender expectations primarily through the lens of religion. She triumphantly posted news articles about Karen Hughes, the U.S. envoy to women in the Middle East, being verbally bested by Muslim women in Turkey and Saudi Arabia. The women Hughes spoke with affirmed that they

did not want more rights in the American sense; they preferred the traditional gender roles prescribed by their religion and culture to those of the United States. Queen Leila also countered the common accusation that Islam denies women equal rights in an essay written to commemorate the Prophet Muhammad's birthday:

Before his death, Prophet Mohamed (s Allah sws)<sup>1</sup> advised us to learn half of our faith from his last wife, Sister Aysha, a woman...As he lay in his deathbed, Prophet Mohamed (s Allah sws) asked of the Muslim men to take care of the women of their family three times. How can we not go by the advice of the man that assured equality and women's rights even as he died?

Here she equated Muhammad's exhortation to men to take care of women and his respect for Aysha with equality and women's rights. She also accepted the woman's role as one who is under the care of the men in her family. Further posts mentioned gender roles in passing, referring to a modest woman as a "good Muslimah" and talking about a woman's respect for her father as a religious duty.

VirtueOne wrote of her struggle between being polite to Muslim men who approach her and being modest and religious at the same time: "I feel confused myself. I'm such a bad muslimah too.:tear:: I respond to guys when they ask me questions but when they're muslim...I seriously don't know what to say but in the inside I feel like telling them to get the hell away from me lol." In her interpretation of religion, women should be modest, quiet, and not talk to men outside of family. However, even Muslim men in the United States did not always observe these standards, as she found at a meeting of the Muslim Students Organization. Though she did not talk to men in other settings, at a religious event she was more conflicted over how to respond to men and maintain her identity as a religious woman. It should be noted that VirtueOne and Queen

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviation for "Salla Allahu Alayhi wa Sallam" which often follows a Muslim's mention of the Prophet Muhammad. It means, "Peace be upon him."

Leila were the only bloggers in this study who wore the hijab. While other of the bloggers referred to gender in terms of religion, usually it was obliquely stated and related to culture or family expectations more than explicitly to Islam. These two bloggers appeared to largely define their gender identities based on religion, at least as they present themselves in their blogs.

### **Women's roles in family**

All of the bloggers in this study were unmarried. According to traditional cultural understandings, they remained under the protection and authority of fathers or brothers. Four of them lived at home with one or both parents, the other three were away at university. Despite living away from home, they were still under the protection of male relatives at some level: two of the bloggers lived with older brothers and the other lived near uncles and male cousins. Emster, who may be considered by Western standards to be the most "liberated" of the women, posted a quote regarding family and gender: "The vast majority [of contemporary feminists] continue to see the 'family' as the site of women's oppression, and to view women's position in society as the product of complex interconnections between the productive and the reproductive spheres of life." She wrote in her own words of conflicts between her family's "reproductive" expectations of her womanhood (marriage and children) and her "productive" plans and goals (pursuing a PhD, owning her own business).

Two of the women who live with their fathers, Princess of Arabia and Ladyras, repeatedly expressed their frustration over their fathers' control of their sexuality. Princess of Arabia wanted to attend her high school prom, but her parents disagreed: "Being a girl with arab parents can reallyyy suck sometimes..they think prom=instant sex HAHAHA." She wrote several times of her father commandeering her cell phone and

dialing the numbers of the men listed in her phone book. Similarly, Ladyras complained of her father's worries about her relationships with men: "If you have a big booty or big tetas and ur father is arab he worries more about u than ur skinny little sister." Both of these women dealt with family expectations of chastity as well as varying interpretations of what that is: sexual abstinence, little or no interaction with men, or modes of dress and behavior that downplay sexuality.

Incidentally, while Ladyras wrote as openly of her relationships with men (going out on dates, dancing with men in clubs, her views on sex) as she did of her relationship with her father, Princess of Arabia used only veiled references to interactions with men other than her family members. In fact, Ladyras wrote much more openly of sexuality than did any of the other bloggers. In one of her earliest posts, she "got funky with" her readers on the topic of anal sex:

WTF! foreal, u make it hard on us girls who DONT want something big n hard shoved up their dookie hole. look guys, its simple: a girl and a guys anus are the same-that means however it feels for you to shove some hard salami up ur booty, it would feel the same for us--now do YOU think that would be fun??? keep it real girls, keep it real guys, getting it up the ass must feel like takin a backwards shit (and NO i havent ever done it and i NEVER will) now how many people would like it if after they took a shit, the shit was shoved back up their ass?? not too many huh? so for all u girls out there who say that shit cuz they know guys like it, not really cuz they like it..just KEEP IT REAL! dont say u like todo shit cuz u think guys like it...i mean i can be as freaky as the next girl but im not gona front and say somethign feels great when anyone with common sense (man OR woman) who honestly thought about it could tell u that it really wouldnt be enjoyable...aite...well ANYWAYS now that i got funky i feel alot better.....

While Ladyras was from a multicultural family with several reference groups, Princess of Arabia's family was wholly Iraqi and spent most of their time with other Iraqi families. Her friends at school were primarily from MMENA backgrounds or from countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan. Perhaps her restraint on writing about relationships with men

was related to the expectations of friends with similar backgrounds and gender expectations who read her blog.

As discussed below, family played a principal role in several dimensions of identity. For these bloggers in general, and Ladyras and Princess of Arabia in particular, family ideas of a woman's role had a defining effect on how they were allowed to negotiate gender identities.

### **Women's roles in marriage and romantic relationships**

Many of the bloggers' posts related to gender were in context of marriage and/or romantic relationships. Traditional expectations are that a girl will marry and raise children, and the bloggers all at some level fell in with this expectation. Several of them referred to arranged marriages or the more contemporary practice of presenting a daughter with approved "suitors" from which to choose a husband. Queen Leila expressed her frustration with being already out of college and not yet married: "Im still have'n da hardest time of my life say'n...I'm 24 who graduated witout have'n some l mention some available suitor 2 me!" Ladyras railed against arranged marriage in several posts:

...I'm tired ofthis stupid mentality...i mean...people need 2 start gettin over doin wut their parents say all the time i mean most stuf yea its cool but SHIT ur parents aint gona marry the guy YOU r so if u dont like him say NO and if they dont like it TOO bad they should accept it and if they dont leave them alone! i mean things like curfew and shit cool wutever but im choosin my husband not them! i meanif they have suggestions some cute guys im open lol but i make that decision and no one else n there's nuttin wrong wit that we not in the 1300s anymore its 2005 it wasnt rite then and it aint right now.."

She also opposed men marrying women much younger than themselves, another traditional practice in her father's culture. She expressed her distaste of this practice at length:

shes like 15! wuts up wit these old ass guys tryna get these young ass girls-i mean i kno if i was a mother i wudnt want to be messin around wit anyone whos the same age (or younger) than my son! thats NASTY and wuts even worse is that these young girls GET with these old wrinkly guys! why do they want old wrinkly balls!?! i dont care how much money the dude has NO WRINKLY OLD BALLS FOR ME!!!

An acquaintance she met in the blog community was the subject of one of her posts:

“She’s like 17 and she has an arranged marriage n she’s miserable...she’s cryin all the time so OBVIOUSLY she’s not happy besides the guys old enuf to b her pops that’s ridiculous...” VirtueOne announced her engagement on her blog, presumably to one of the suitors introduced to her as a possible marriage candidate.

Marriage was unquestionably the norm for most of the bloggers. Princess of Arabia often referred to her future husband as a solution to her current romantic problems: “im so sick of girly guys..and im so sick of desperate guys..where is my husband to scare the stalkers away lolol aww.” She also jokingly posted a personal ad on her site for the kind of partner she is looking for: “WANTED: a sane, normal, arab guy. NO I WANT A MAN!..that will not hurt a girl.” Zeina feared that her desires for marriage and a career as a medical doctor cannot both be fulfilled:

When looking for a suitable husband/wife, guys tend to go for girls with either equal or lesser success levels. Girls tend to go for guys with either equal or higher levels. So it would be rare to find a girl doctor married to a salesman or something, but it wouldn’t be that uncommon for a man. The reason for this is man’s pride. No guy wants to feel like the lesser one in a relationship, thats how it has always been.

She wrote in several other posts about her theories of male-female relationships, all with the end goal of marriage. One of her theories was that most men are interested in “bad” girls (those who “like to drink and party and be ‘bad’”) when they are younger. When they are ready to marry, the men realize they want to marry a “good” girl (the minority of girls who are not “easy”) but the “good” girls are all married by then. Of these men, she

wrote, “They wait too long and then become those guys that at 28 are looking for anyone to marry! Sucks for them, they should have taken the time to know the good girl, instead of going for the easy girl.” Zeina feared that since she is a “good” girl and pursuing an advanced degree, she will not have the opportunity to marry.

Only Emster, the blogger who lives apart from her family, questioned traditional values of marriage. Upon attending an elaborate wedding, she wrote:

I asked myself if it was normal to push all the pressure off as many Arab women, as soon as they hit 17, start to get suitors. I am one of those few that pushes them off...Are we bred to believe what the society believes is correct because we want to fit into the majority sociologically, or am I feeling depressed on a personal level because I don't adhere to these societal rules, laws, etc, and keep pushing them off, or the institution of marriage, or because I genuinely have no desire to get married? Or do I?

Her feelings of dissonance about marriage reflected her experiences living in both Egypt and the United States, her academic studies of gender, and her family's expectations for her future. While Emster was alone in her questioning, she was also the eldest and most educated of the bloggers, the most well traveled, and the only one who did not submit directly to her parents' authority.

Gender, as one of the primary dimensions of identity, played an important part in defining how these bloggers see themselves and the world. Religious concepts of womanhood helped to define their rights as women and their public behavior. Family roles for women may have affected day-to-day interactions with men as well as internal perceptions of how a woman should behave. Finally, feelings and thoughts about marriage influenced gender identity by prescribing romantic roles and perceptions of men. Their blogs represented a place to explore feelings and thoughts about gender roles.

### **Cultural and Ethnic Identity**

For the women in this study, culture and ethnicity were complex elements of identity expressed in their blogs. The words used to identify themselves with particular groups varied from woman to woman and from time to time in each woman's representations of herself. They aligned themselves with certain cultural/ethnic groups by joining bloggings devoted to being Muslim, Egyptian, Arab, and Arab American, among others. In posts they discussed their specific heritage and how it affected plans, relationships, politics, and interactions with those outside their group. Conflict between the American parts and MMENA parts of their culture were frequently present, even directly compared.

All of the women identified themselves with multiple labels, though each one of them used "Arab" to describe herself. Only three (Queen Leila, Zeina, and Princess of Arabia) called themselves "Arab-American." Six identified themselves based on their family's country and/or geographical region of origin (i.e., African, Egyptian, Middle Eastern, Iraqi). Only one of the women (Ladyras) did not explicitly use "Muslim" to describe herself, though she indirectly affirmed her Muslim identity. This may have been influenced by her membership in a family that was both Muslim and Christian.

### **Political affinities**

With the exception of Ladyras, all of the bloggers in this study displayed passion about politics in the MENA region. They expressed solidarity with the Palestinian people, anti-Iraqi war sentiments, and criticism of Israel. Several wrote of their frustrations with the equation of Arabs or Muslims with terrorists, and even wondered if U.S. security personnel are reading their blogs.



Queen Leila, a leader in the blogging community, often encouraged her readers to “represent” on behalf of Palestine, Muslims, and Arab-Americans. In using the term “represent” she implied showing the positive side of these identities to outsiders. For example, in listing her favorite celebrities of the year, she included “dat Muslim Iraqi dude from BB6 [a television reality show] cuz he represented!” VirtueOne offered free animated graphics to anyone who would post them “representing Palestine” on another blog. Queen Leila often wrote of her involvement in the Arab-American community. She participated in Arab-American charitable events, wrote for local activist magazines, and helped in the founding of the Arab American National Museum in Michigan.

On Egyptian national holidays Queen Leila wrote about the historical event related to the holiday: “Afta celebrate’n da kick azz of Israel outta Sina’ we get 2 celebrate anotha history in da make’n...Egyptian Ahmed ElBaradei wins the Nobel Prize!” Her most frequent references to political issues were thoughts about problems in the MENA region, usually ending with a lesson or exhortation for her readers. After expressing her outrage over suicide bombing at a wedding in Jordan she wrote,

The thing bout being an Arab though, is that we are too strong to let something like this just make us breakdown and cry. We cried long enough, and its our strength that got Israel out of Egypt and Lebanon, its our strength that keeps Palestine undefeatable for almost 60 years, and Iraq being unbreakable through decades of struggles. It might be a sad time to be an Arab, but it’s the Arab strength that makes me prouder and prouder every single day that I am Arab.

Other of the bloggers commented frequently on world events related to the MENA region. Zeina, although she was depressed by news and tried to avoid it, found herself confronted with a recent bombing in a resort area of Egypt: “These things depress me really greatly...But how can I not watch [the news], its like its following me...The place

you go to enjoy your country is ruined. Your country's economy and its people will suffer more."

Several of the bloggers expressed their political affinities in opposition to the practices of the United States in the MENA region. Zeina, during a university class on Arab politics and history, expressed her views of colonialism in Egypt and linked them to current actions of the United States in Iraq:

People kept talking about Iraq and saying, "we should have tried to democratize an easier country first..." the whole time Im sitting there my blood was boiling. WHY are you discussing WHICH country the US should democratize instead of asking if the US even has the RIGHT to democratize a country or IMPOSE their thoughts or what about the fact that its BS for them to try to do it in the first place?!

Her frustration was evident, particularly in her use of capital letters to indicate shouting in this post. Emster shared her anger toward United States policy. After a fellow Egyptian wished her a happy fourth of July, she complained at length about cultural imperialism: "What the hell is up with those who are obsessed with others holidays? Suppose you could call that the blanket of power of the sole superpower—apparently America." She too disagreed with the United States' intervention in Iraq:

Yeah, once again the United States is "rebuilding a nation." Rebuild yourself before your jeopardize another nation whom you don't understand culturally and obviously not politically...your obviously building for yourself, and nothing else. Disgusting, absolutely disgusting...this is the reason why I am so absolutely frustrated with this country. That no one sees the other and is simply stuck to their self.

Despite Emster's strong and often bitter criticism of United States policy, she still primarily identified herself as "American" and used possessive pronouns when describing U.S. institutions; "our military" for example.

Emster was the only one of the bloggers who expressed concerns about possible government perception of her as a terrorist. After discussing terrorism at length, she

wrote, “Mind you, I write this from a remote location in the Middle East... Well folks, I’m on kilo 26 on the North Coast at my parents place just past Alex[andria] in Silver Beach. Come and get me you information fools. Argh—can you sense the frustration?”

Princess of Arabia appeared to be the only blogger directly involved in MMENA politics. Though she infrequently mentions politics, she did write about her experience voting in the Iraqi elections in 2005:

yesturday was the iraqi voting thingy...my mom and dad kept harassing me to gooo so i went...i honestly think it was worth it though...like ive never been really into the whole “iraqi thing” but it was just a really good feeling once i placed my ballot in the box...

Unlike the bloggers mentioned above, Princess of Arabia did not appear to own her heritage politically; rather it was heavily influenced by her parents. Similarly, Ladyras did not appear interested in politics. In the posts used for this study, she did not discuss political issues at all.

### **Religious beliefs**

Each of the bloggers in this study identified herself as Muslim. For some, Islam was a major topic of posts and an integral part of the blog. For others, it was constant but more peripheral part of life.

VirtueOne and Queen Leila, the most overtly religious of the bloggers, incorporated religious exhortation and verses from the Qur’an and hadith into their blogs. Both of them wore Islamic dress and strictly adhered to the requirements of Islam, such as abstaining from alcohol and limiting interactions with men. VirtueOne discussed her struggles with maintaining a Muslim identity in the United States: “It’s so hard to shop when ur a muslimah. I hate how all these “shirts” are so tiny that they don’t even qualify as shirts lol. I have to be searching to find long enough shirts so that I can wear with jeans

so they can cover and finding those is HARD!!” She also reported feeling strange about the female icons on restrooms because their dress was so different from hers. As an integral part of her life, Islam related back to most anything she posted about, for example, earthquakes: “The earthquakes keep increasing here in California. So I gotta work on being a better Muslim. Cuz I might die soon or later but I wanna be prepared.”

She often included devotional poems or thoughts in her posts:

They say Islam is in the heart. Ummm...what about the rest? with that comes other obligations. It is said when you believe you react therefore you act upon it. But truly these days there is a huge amount of hypocrisy amongst us ‘Muslims.’ May Allah forgive us and guide us to the right path and make it easy on us.

Queen Leila and VirtueOne posted their answers to quizzes passed on by other bloggers. In each quiz, questions such as “favorite food?” and “what inspires you?” allow bloggers to get to know each other’s personalities better. Both of these women firmly identified themselves as observant Muslims through their quiz answers. Questions related to alcohol and sex were answered with “No...haram,” meaning “forbidden.” Each listed their favorite month as Ramadan, the month of fasting in Muslim observance, and refused to reveal the hair color beneath their veils. Queen Leila wrote about Islam primarily to encourage her fellow Muslims in the faith. After the earthquake in Pakistan, she encouraged her Muslim “sisters” to “Remember that Allah is the most Merciful and Beneficent.”

Other bloggers wrote about Islam as the context or setting for ideas and events. Zeina posted a story about meeting a French-speaking Muslim immigrant at her local mosque, Ladyras wrote about attending a Muslim funeral service for a family member, Princess of Arabia described “stuffing my face” before attending an all-night prayer

service at the mosque. For these bloggers, the practice of religion was a part of everyday life, but not one they felt compelled to discuss often.

### **Family roles**

As mentioned above, family expectations to some extent influenced gender roles for each of these women. Families may also have determined the woman's degree of independence, her role in the community, and at times her professional and academic goals. Because these women's parents and other family members did not (to their knowledge) read their blogs, they offered a safe place to vent frustrations and negotiate the lines between self and family.

MMENA women are often expected to live at home with their parents until marriage, and as noted above, all but one of the women in this study lived with a male relative. After graduating from university, Queen Leila planned to move into an apartment alone. She wrote of her parents' struggle for acceptance and her conflict between obedience and the desire for greater independence. Eventually she asked her readers, "Who here feels it iz wrong or a'rite 4 a sista (or a brotha) 2 move out of their family home 2 live on their own? why or why not?" At the conclusion of this study, she still had not reached a decision.

Princess of Arabia, who often wrote of clashes with her parents related to dating, also complained of being forced to be with the "iraqi crew," a group of her parents' friends who gathered at different houses for meals. Her family expected her to be part of the Iraqi community in her area, even sending her to Arabic school on Saturdays, but she did not find it enjoyable: "anywaysss iraqi gathering at my house..it was really akward with the moms n me at first..but its so-so right now i guess..its my life.."

Parental expectations regarding professions and life pursuits heavily influence some of the bloggers. Zeina, for example, planned to attend medical school on the urging of her parents. She sometimes questioned her decision to follow their wishes, joined by her blog readers who posted comments about their parents' directives on professions. After graduation, she experienced severe anxiety about her future, as she reported in her blog:

What is my purpose? Arab families do not like confusion and instability. So their solution is choosing on ones behalf. So now I feel like Im following orders or something. Like I dont have any choice what I can and cannot do with my life. And THAT is the worst feeling ever. To feel that your life and your future doesnt belong to you anymore, to feel like you are trapped into whatever the "family" wants you to do and where they want you to go. Maybe what they pick is the best choice, but they should at least make an effort to prove that to me, to convince me that it is the best choice. Instead I just feel like they stomped on all my goals and aspirations and gave me new ones (namely money and prestige).

During her time in Cairo, Emster also felt her family heritage shape how she viewed herself. She made peace, in a way, with who she was in her family during a visit to the house of her mother's birth:

I sat on the bed my mother was born on. I don't know why, call me silly and sensitive, but have you ever felt a moment of pure bliss, where you feel you know everything, it all makes sense, the pieces fit together intricately, a sweet awakening of sorts, an appreciative effort on the side of an inanimate object to send sense and emotion into your life? I can't explain it, but I felt this last night...I was content. I can't remember the last time I was that content actually, with anyone, anything. Almost like God was looking at me and smiling, happy with me, instead of laughing.

In writing about her experience, she solidified the identification with her mother and her Egyptian heritage.

Despite frequent conflicts, the women in this study wrote about how highly they valued their families. Zeina planned to "get a job and send money back to Egypt" for a sick uncle; Queen Leila said she will "always be there 2 help wit their load." After

visiting multiple family members in Cairo during Ramadan, Emster reflected, “And I’ve realized, learned this: while to forgive is the greatest gift, family and heritage is the greatest possession.”

### **Social life**

The women in this study took part in the social life of both the local MMENA community and dominant American culture. VirtueOne and Queen Leila wrote primarily about their social experiences with others from similar backgrounds, while Ladyras wrote more about interactions with those outside the MMENA community. The other bloggers were somewhere in between, writing about times with friends from both spheres. All, however, continually affirmed the importance of friends and of having some kind of community. They discussed specific aspects of MMENA culture including food, women’s interactions with each other, and MMENA-typical behaviors they found humorous. Finally, several of the bloggers wrote posts directly comparing MMENA culture with American culture. Each of these women used her blog as a space to explore differences between MMENA and American social life, choosing which parts of each culture she would adopt in her own life.

Princess of Arabia rarely wrote a post in which extensive references to her friends and family did not appear. In her time away from school and family responsibilities she spent time with friends face-to-face or chatted with them online. Similarly, Zeina usually posted about her outings with friends, or used a shared experience (such as exams) to begin a post on a more abstract topic like politics or religion. While her parents were not in the same city, friends helped her avoid loneliness: “Im really glad I have people that I can eat dinner with so Im not just sitting at home watching TV waiting for maghreb [the sunset prayer], eating alone, then studying in the isolation that is my apartment. I guess

we have all gotten much closer because we are alone and our families are not here to fill that void.” Close friends were usually from similar family backgrounds and were often Muslim. Emster, however, wrote about Christian friends she visited.

Traditional food served as a form of comfort for these women, particularly when they longed for social interactions with people who understood their heritage. Zeina used cooking Egyptian foods as a way to connect with her family and as an escape: “Cooking is fun sometimes, especially when you need a study break. It reminds me of home.” Princess of Arabia also wrote often of food, describing her meals with an Iraqi friend. When her parents made her attend Iraqi gatherings, the only bright spot she mentioned was the food. VirtueOne described her meals in almost every post about spending time with friends: “I went over my friend Rasha’s place and it was great she made Fasoolya [bean stew]. It was good and some Rizz [rice].” Queen Leila shared her new year’s resolution of losing weight: “Goal: lose 20lbs gained since work’n wit Arabz!” It appeared that for these women, the sharing of food was an integral part of social life.

With the exception of Ladyras, all of the bloggers referred to women in MMENA culture as being jealous or gossiping. Zeina describes being denied a table at an Egyptian restaurant by a hostess jealous of her and her friends’ attractiveness. After a negative experience with a classmate, Princess of Arabia wrote, “im sick of arab girls im so sick of them..i can’t handle it anymore...sometimes its such a disgrace to say im arab cuz im labeled as a gossiping bitch.” Emster described her university job as like any other job, “just add Egyptian gossip to it.” VirtueOne turned her experience with gossip into a religious exhortation:

Never go out on the streets without expecting for someone to see you, recognize you, and Gossip! It’s crazy. It is just amazing how people can just do that. So then



why don't they go and give dawa [share the message of Islam] and spread the message of Islam that quickly?? Good one huh?! Gheebah [gossiping] is haram [forbidden] yall. (just a reminder).

VirtueOne, in addition to worrying about women's gossip in her community, joked about women's social customs. In discussing her upcoming wedding, she wrote, "The only thing I am worried about is the makeup...usually arab ladies tend to make the bride look white as paper and always bright red lipstick making em' look like stop signs lmao." Because these bloggers were at the intersection of both MMENA culture and dominant American culture, they had the ability to see both groups' "typical" behaviors that they found funny. Emster humorously vented her frustrations with Egyptian culture's "beurocracy and disruptive irresponsible rude attitudes...major problem with privacy...[and] spoiled thinking." With a lighter approach, Ladyras described

some funny things that my families do—my arab side and my puerto rican side...why do arabs use such gay sounding nicknames like susu and medo...my dad calls me idiot in English, and khara in arabic (the arabic word for shit) arabs and nicknames man...How come whenever an arab cracks a joke he has to high five someone about it? And then everyone laughs all loud and slaps their knees and claps their hands and stomps their feet.

Despite their criticisms of MMENA culture, these bloggers still appeared to prefer it to dominant American culture. VirtueOne, meeting a Jordanian friend after an absence, wrote, "Seeing her again made me realize how the U.S. sucks! Back home people seem to relax and take their time and here it's like everyone's on the go all of the time that they don't stop to enjoy the moment." Zeina elaborated on these differences in multiple posts. She blamed individuality for the negative aspects of American culture:

In Egypt, the whole society circles around family and friends. They are number one priority in a persons life. In the US, people put themselves as number one. So everything is based upon what I am gonna do, who is going to take ME there, who is going to entertain ME...ME.. ME...MEEEE...One [culture] stresses these close relationships and friendships, one stresses self-success and motivation.

After spending the month of Ramadan with her family in Cairo, Emster gained a new sense of belonging and identity, never known in the United States, thanks to

MMENA cultural practices:

I've come to a realization of things I've been missing because of my last month spent at my grandfathers house. In Minnesota, families are spread apart arbitrarily, no one joins together in order to enjoy the holidays—Ramadan holidays that is—and it is never the same feel as it is in Cairo. People forget I suppose...histories are complicated...lives are not, well, intermingled...Ramadan in Egypt is people staying awake for hours on end, colorful lights lining the streets, decorative lanterns hanging on every street corner...people are happy, and because Egypt is predominantly Muslim, everyone celebrates and can identify with one another. Almost a feeling of belonging...

As a sometime member of the dominant culture of Egypt, Emster experienced the benefit of cultural events that are part of mainstream life. However, in other posts she distanced herself socially from Egyptians. Like the other bloggers, she vacillated between identifying herself with MMENA culture and with American culture.

### **Popular culture**

Both MMENA and American popular culture featured prominently in most of these blogs. The blogging service offered a “now playing/reading/watching” feature at the top of each post in which bloggers could identify the music, books, or movies they were using at the time. The feature displayed an image of the product (i.e., album cover), the name of the artist/author, title, and included a link to the product on Amazon.com. Most of these bloggers made use of this feature regularly, with both Arabic-language and American products. While they wrote entire posts about Arabic-language entertainment media, more frequent passing references were made to American entertainment media. Presumably, they felt it necessary to explain the Arabic-language media to a readership that was most likely not familiar with it. For example, while Princess of Arabia explained who Samira Said and Nancy Ajram are (singers who perform in Arabic), she made

reference to Willy Wonka and Michael Jackson with the assumption they are familiar to her audience.

Zeina, in particular, positioned herself as a kind of advocate for Arabic-language media. She recommended that her readers watch Egyptian films, read books by Egyptian authors, and listen to Arabic music. Both she and VirtueOne mentioned watching the 2005 Hollywood film *Kingdom of Heaven*, which was about the Crusades. While both appreciated the sympathetic portrayal of Muslims and Salah Al Din (Saladin), Zeina found fault with the Hollywood version in comparison to the original Arabic version: “It kind of pissed me off. It was just way too hollywood for me. Ohh wow, another romance placed in a war movie...just what we need. Annoying.”

These women used their blogs to establish the elements of MMENA and American culture they enjoyed. Like other aspects of their identities, their use of popular media resided between both cultures. In this way, VirtueOne uniquely combined her Muslim and mainstream American identities: “Have u guys heard the news?? Spongebob is Muslim and his real name is Mohamed??!! How great is that...ohhhh...nope...JK...lol.”

### **Interactions with outsiders**

As members of a cultural and ethnic group that could be considered under attack in the United States today, these bloggers were fully conscious of their position at the edges of dominant culture. They were therefore concerned with positively representing MMENA culture to those outside of it. Several found themselves objects of curiosity in public spaces, and one even encountered hate speech in the blogosphere.

Zeina indignantly described at length her experiences with her university’s Arab Students Association’s annual party:

The wonderful arabic party had become a debaucherous drunken frat party. It had become a bunch of stupid girls and guys getting drunk and “hooking up.” Needless to say, I was extremely dissappointed in them all. We are Arabs, not Americans... how could they act so trashy! It was a disgrace...I expected all arab muslims (and all muslims) except for a minority to be good and pure as well...and to think that all the impressionable freshmans went to this party and got the impression that all Arab-Americans act like that is just sad. What kind of example are these people?!

From this post, it seemed that Zeina’s main concern with the behavior of her fellow students was how it appeared to outsiders, the disgrace it brought upon Muslims and Arabs. Interestingly, this was the only post in her blog that discussed expectations of purity and goodness for Muslims.

VirtueOne, visibly Muslim because of her hijab, wrote about being approached by curious strangers:

Why would someone walk up to a girl with hijab and ask em’ “are you muslim?”, when they’re muslim and the later the person who asks says “oh yea...that was a stupid question hehe.” ...okaaaaay issueees I tell ya....issues....Anywho yeah most of my friends and I have these akward incouters with people like this lol who think they can get us to talk and start a conversation.

One of her values, mentioned in earlier posts, was modesty and silence with strangers.

These types of interactions, while uncomfortable, also conflicted with her personal values. In posting this story on her blog, she was both sharing her experience with fellow hijab-wearers and cautioning non-Muslim readers against this type of behavior.

Zeina reported a conversation with strangers on another blogging service about the Iraq war. She was one of the few who disagreed with the prevailing atmosphere of war support. “I wrote that I wasnt going to get involved because Im an Arab and in this day and age its not safe for arabs to discuss that kinda thing. About 5 people replied saying that I was stupid and trying to play the victim.” Zeina responded with telling them exactly her opinion, which led to “a HUGE fight with everyone attacking” her. Identifying

herself as an “Arab,” in this situation, immediately put her on the defensive with the others in the conversation.

In the most overt challenge to identity in the blogs in this study, a stranger posted a hate-speech comment on Princess of Arabia’s blog. It was apparently based on her screen name and her membership in MMENA blogrings, as the comment was unrelated to her post. It accused her personally of being dirty, smelly, and having “Osama kids.” It also attacked Islam, saying “your religion is fake” among other more offensive things. She reposted the comment on her main page with her own commentary: “I honestly could care less what you think because your nothing but a stupid close minded person whos possibly in the KKK...words dont kill me so you can take those words and shove it up your slimy butt hole.”

As seen through these examples, these bloggers faced challenges to their cultural and ethnic identities in everyday life as well as in the blogosphere. They used their blogs to express frustration with outsiders’ perceptions, to educate outsiders on acceptable interactions, and to defend themselves against attacks on their identities.

### **Intersections of Identity**

Personal identity, gender identity, and cultural/ethnic identity were constantly negotiated and developed in these blogs, as noted above. These multiple dimensions of identity interacted in uniquely overlapping, dynamic ways within each woman’s blog. This is illustrated in two diagrams, below, for two of the bloggers with very different identity intersections.

## INTERSECTIONS OF IDENTITY DIMENSIONS

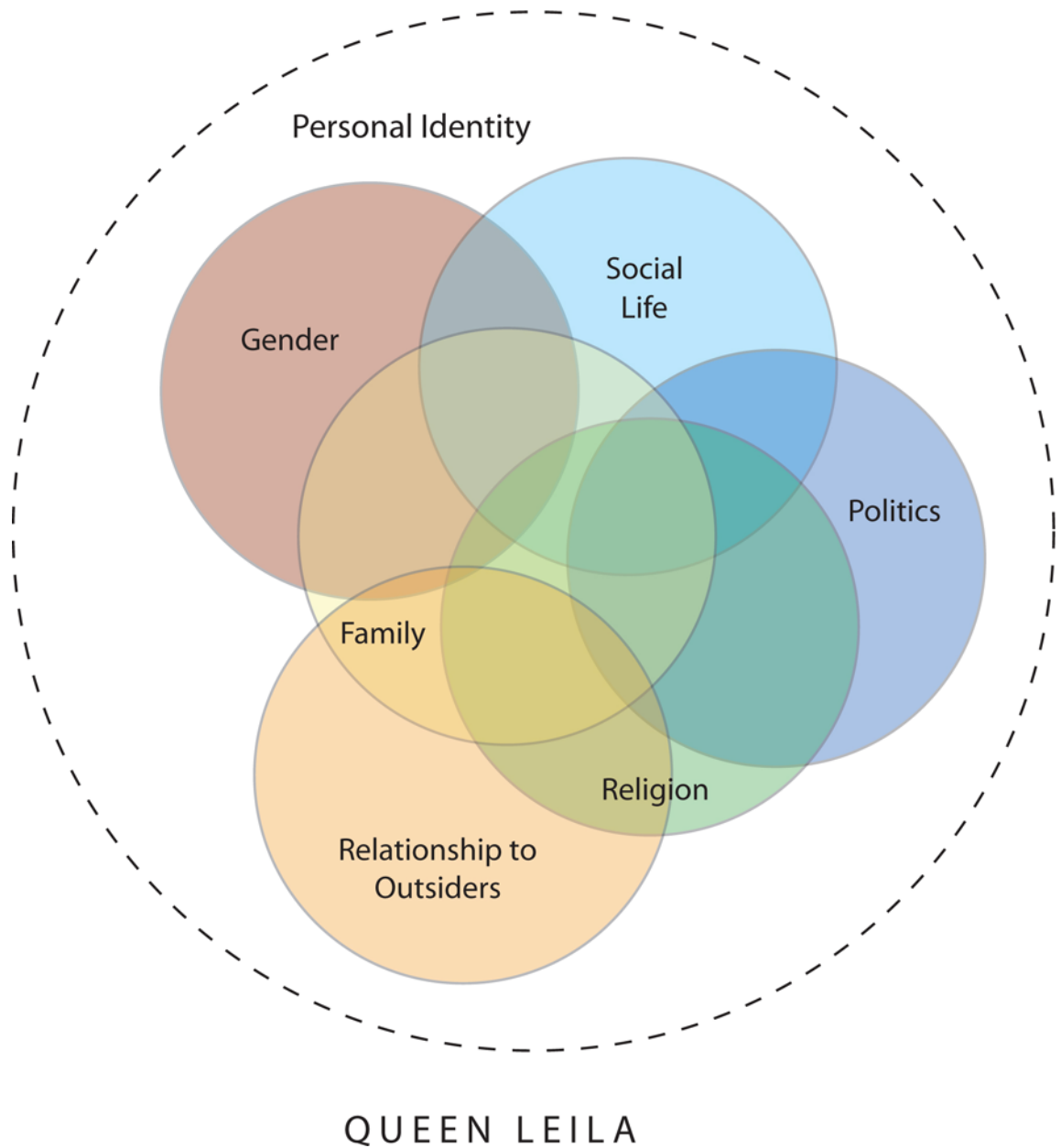


Figure 3. Identity dimension intersections in Queen Leila's blog.

Queen Leila's identity dimensions, as presented in her blog, were for the most part clustered together in one group. Her personal identity, the largest circle, encompassed all other aspects. Politics, religion, family, gender, and social life were closely related and overlapped in many instances. Her relationship to outsiders, however, was removed from

the other dimensions to some extent, and completely separated from her social life. In her blog, her interactions with those outside MMENA culture were usually in relation to a political topic, in service to her family, or involved explication of Islam. The dotted line around her personal identity, of which all other aspects are components, reflects the dynamic nature of identity: it was constantly negotiated and renegotiated in the context of her blog.

#### INTERSECTIONS OF IDENTITY DIMENSIONS

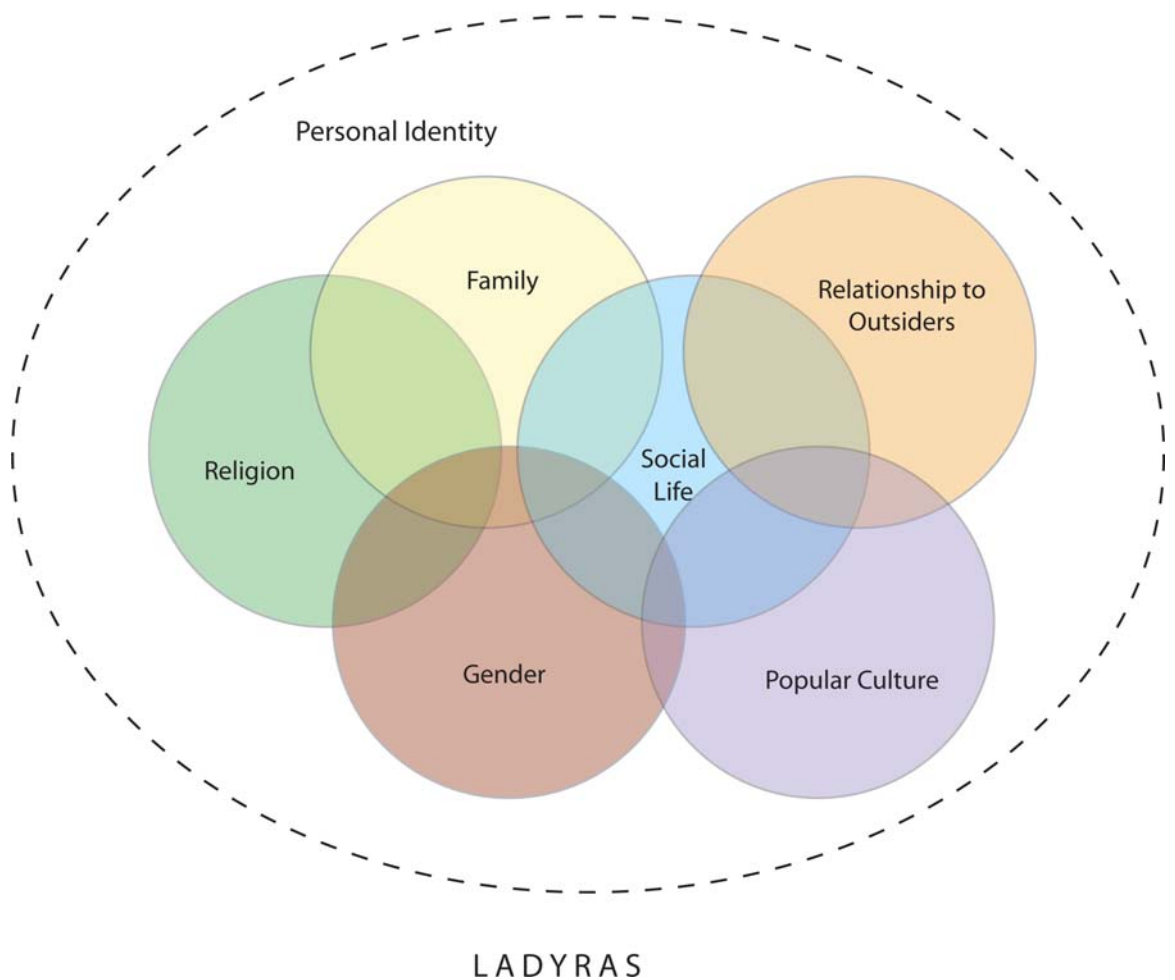


Figure 4. Identity dimension intersections in Ladyras' blog.

In contrast, Ladyras's identity intersections were less consonant as shown in the above diagram (Figure 4). Her religion, as expressed in her blog, was more peripheral

and intersected only with family and gender identity. Her social life was completely separate from her religion. Unlike Queen Leila, Ladyras's family was also on the periphery of her identity, not interacting at all with her interests in popular culture or her relationships with outsiders.

These two diagrams represent the two extremes of identity intersections among the bloggers in this study. Queen Leila's identity was relatively consonant between dimensions, although within each one she wrote of the paradoxes of living between MMENA culture and American culture. VirtueOne's intersections were similar to those of Queen Leila. Zeina's and Emster's were slightly less consonant, with similar internal paradoxes. Princess of Arabia and Ladyras had the most dissonance in identity dimensions, with several not overlapping at all. Interestingly, these two bloggers displayed the least amount of conflict within the dimensions, dealing primarily with issues such as parental conflict rather than internal struggles with identity.

### **Community**

Community in the blogosphere, while often debated, is not a static concept. Often, the development of community, particularly if it is not based on existing face-to-face relationships, is dependent on technological features available through the blogging service. Xanga, the service used by the bloggers in this study, provided capabilities for joining blogrings, giving eprops, and subscribing to others' blogs. A blogring is an affinity group, set up by any member of Xanga, for a specific group of people. For example, the "Hijab: The Holiest Hat of Them All" blogring stated: "It's all good in the hood. Jump on the scarfie bandwagon, share lame experiences, including all the times people have thought you were a nun...an Arab ninja...Sheets for the head, and the bed too! Happy to be Hijabi!" All the members of this blogring (Queen Leila and VirtueOne



are members) wore the hijab and displayed a link to this blog on their sites. Eprops, along with comments, are the social currency of the blogosphere. At the end of each post are links to “add comments” and “add eprops.” Readers may click on these links, type in their comments, and choose to give 2, 1, or 0 eprops. Comments and eprops are then visible to all subsequent readers of the blog, unless the owner elects to delete them or have them disabled. Readers may subscribe to other blogs, in which case they receive email notification when the blog is updated. A list of a bloggers’ subscriptions appears on every page of the blog, just above the list of bloggings.

Each of the blogs included in this study could be described in terms of Jones’ settlement concept: they all have sustained public interaction over time with a variety of communicators. As Jones noted, relationships and emotional ties easily develop in these virtual settlements, leading to virtual communities. Blanchard identified sense of community as the defining factor of a virtual community: the participants must have feelings of membership, the fulfillment of needs, and a shared emotional connection. While all these blogs were settlements, not all showed a sense of community, and this sense was stronger in some than in others. The communities involved were primarily either focused on reinforcing face-to-face interactions or on building and maintaining ties with friends based wholly on virtual relationships.

The bloggers in this study built blog-based community through the use of bloggings, comments and eprops, and “tagging” with quizzes. They reinforced their online communities through discussion about the community itself. Other bloggers strengthened face-to-face friendships by posting pictures together, soliciting advice, and giving updates on day-to-day activities.

### **Blog-based Community**

Ladyras, VirtueOne, and Queen Leila primarily displayed sense of community in the context of blog-based relationships. Some of their friendships with other bloggers began online, specifically through religious and regional bloggings, and transitioned into a combination of online and face-to-face interactions. VirtueOne and Queen Leila, for example, met through a blogging for devout Muslims in their city. They developed their friendship online then met face-to-face. Their blogs became a way to keep in touch and maintain a relationship when both were busy. The day before Queen Leila's university graduation, VirtueOne posted in her honor: "I wanna wish [Queen Leila] a great day tomorrow inshallah [if God wills] cuz she's graduating yayay!! Mabrook Alayky!! [Congratulations] I'm so proud of ya [Queen Leila]!!" She also used the blog as a kind of pager: "ohhh and [Queen Leila] girl....I haven't heard from u in a while!! call me!!"

Ladyras developed most of her online relationships through joining bloggings. In early posts, she complained that no one read her blog or left comments. After joining a blogging she had more hits on her site and eventually online friendships, subscribers, and regular readers. She expressed her gratitude regularly to her readers:

I just wanted to say how souped i was cuz people started actually reading my page lol. i know it aint the greatest but u know wut-who cares man i got like FOUR people who read my page and all the tiems i tried to start up a xanga page that never happend b4. THANK YOU! YAY! lol

Unlike the other bloggers in this study, Ladyras explicitly addressed her reasons for starting a blog.

it's kind of funny, but when i started my page, i didnt tell anyone i knew about it...it's more like a release where i can be the part of me they all dont know, i mean, thats bad aint it, when u feel like u cant tell ur friends n the people in ur life what ur thinkin about-but then again i want to write wutever i want0if someone pisses me off ima write about it, so i dont want them readin it and gettin their feelings hurt-that's y i dont hav a pic on my page, It feels good to kind of let go, jus say wutever i

want and not care if anyone passes judgement cuz no one really knows who i am. I dont know if anyone gets taht-most people write these things, and everyone that reads it knows them-but i mean, if i wana tell someone about wuts going on in my life and i KNEW them i could jus tell them wenever i saw them. u kno that alter ego that comes out after 12 at night lol, that's what i wana let out sometimes.

She wrote for herself, for self-expression, and for creating a community outside her regular sphere of life. Here she emphasized her anonymity in the blogosphere while affirming her need to express herself to those not directly concerned with her problems.

Ladyras and Queen Leila saw themselves as positively contributing to their readers' lives through their posts. Ladyras wrote, "i've been a philosopher for the past couple of entries, right? Hey just to let everyone know those entries are for my benefit too, but i really hope that sometimes someone reads them and actually thinks and MAYBE just MAYBE someone will be positively influenced by them....lol but then maybe im just being too hopeful..." Queen Leila, after exhorting her readers to be grateful for God's gifts, wrote, "I praise Allah (swt) everyday 4 such wonderful ppl such as yaselvez be'n in my life... even if we spoke 1ce, don't speak 2 each otha anymore, haven't spoken in yearz, or we just spoke a sec ago n bug each other everyday..." They fulfilled the needs of others for support and relationship while having their own needs met as well.

Most bloggers seemed to define the success of their blog and of individual posts in context of how many comments and eprops they received. Those who did not update for a while profusely apologized upon returning for their lack of commenting: "Sorry if I haven't commented on ur guys pages lately but I'll try to catch up on that this week or next inshallah;" (VirtueOne) and "anyways yall ima bout to comment sorry i been slackin!!! but i still love you!! muahz!~" (Ladyras). Similarly, if a blogger did not receive the same number of comments she had before, she asked her readers what was wrong: "Where has everyone been on xanga lately? I mean i know i disappeared but it seems like

so did everyone else and now that I'm back here they're still gone. Hmmm." Ladyras reposted her best friend's comment on her main page, after she created her own blogging and had a record number of comments. Her friend wrote, "way too gooo...u got 40+ comments... that's an accomplishment haha... and you got lots of ppl to join [the blogging]." Ladyras apparently felt that comments indicated popularity and appreciation. She wrote,

i hate it when i read peoples xangas and comment and try to reach out and they ignore me and never comment back! i take it personally lol ask her! it makes me feel like suttin is bad about me cuz they wont comment back but i kno they go on cuz they have new entires-im just real weird about things like that i duno...anyways o well thnx to those of u who DO comment love u guys lol hahah

Queen Leila limited her posting because few of her readers commented on her entries: "I know I haven't updated in a while... I guess dat even though I'm get'n hella hits, not much commentz, so i just let it hang." Several bloggers ended posts with phrases like "leave me some love" to indicate that readers should leave comments.

Other forms of community building used by several of the bloggers were online quizzes and "tagging." In tagging, a blogger posts a list of questions and their answers on her blog. She then "tags" several friends, who read her blog, to indicate that they should answer the questions on their blogs. The questions tend to reveal information about personality, likes and dislikes, and interests. In posting questions and tagging others, the bloggers in this study helped develop relationships with others from the virtual community, dependent upon similar backgrounds, values, and interests.

As noted above, several of the bloggers extensively discussed the online community itself in their blogs. This too was a form of community building: expressing appreciation for virtual friends more firmly cemented the bond. For example, after posting about a personal problem and receiving many comments, Ladyras wrote,

today's entry is dedicated to YALL...that's right...you xanga-ers. my buddies. the special ones—you know who you are—and even the ones who take time out of their day just to say wutsup. I'm just really glad I started xanga I mean after last night's entry and you all were like all concerned I felt so LOVED...well just to let you know I have mad love for you guys too!! I mean I wish I actually knew you guys I mean we give each other advice, laugh joke around, some of us have inside jokes, we comfort each other, not LITERALLY a shoulder to cry on but you know...you all take the time out of your day to read wutsup with me wutsup botherin me tell me things will be ok...I mean that's more than some of my real life friends do lol damn I just feel real close to some of you you know! I just wanted to let you all know that you all are the best lol thnx for makin my xanga experience so great :)

She followed these words with “gifts” for her online friends—images of flowers, candy, perfume, and electronics. This entry, too, received many affirming comments from readers.

### **Face-to-face Community Reinforcement**

While the bloggers discussed above created virtual communities with their blogs, others primarily reinforced face-to-face relationships. Zeina wrote to an audience of friends in her university as well as friends from Egypt. Princess of Arabia addressed her friends from high school and the Iraqi community in her area. Emster wrote to keep friends around the world updated on her life. Although these bloggers' intended audiences were face-to-face friends and family, some blog-based relationships were formed as well.

Zeina and Princess of Arabia affirmed friendships by posting pictures of themselves with friends. Princess of Arabia, in particular, posted pictures of herself with friends on a weekly basis. For her best friend's birthday, she posted several pages of pictures of them together as well as a tribute in words:

i love u sooo much u are my bestest friend and we made it through yet ANOTHER year of absolutly no fights or disagreements... your there for me no matter what..all the guy trouble..oh lordy..all the drama all the tears all the laughter..all shared with you!! cuz your my best friend! and im NOTHING without you!! your what makes me complete!! your my twin..your..apart of me!i love you!

Similarly, Zeina posted pictures of herself with friends in Cairo and in Texas. In each post with friend pictures, she addressed the friend in the photos as well as the others who were reading.

Some bloggers solicited advice from their friends for situations that were not fully explained in the blog, assuming that their friends already understood the background. Princess of Arabia, for example, began a post with apologizing for being distant, gave an explanation related to a recent personal problem, then asked for feedback on what she should do. She also frequently posted personal messages to friends whom she did not identify in the post. While most were pleasant, one was not:

im just really disappointed and disturbed at all the people that lie and are two faced...im really, really dissapointed in you..and the sad thing is..i've been protecting you for so long..and now im giving up on you..i always thought u were a much better person than me..you being a hijabi and all..but now..i realize your not. You let me down. BIG TIME. i dont think i can protect you anymore.

She does not indicate, in this post or later ones, if the person addressed here was known to other readers. It may be assumed that based on the close-knit nature of the face-to-face community that she probably was, and that this was Princess of Arabia's way of speaking her mind with less confrontation than a live encounter would have had.

These bloggers most often maintained face-to-face relationships by sharing their daily activities and plans. They include many accounts of shopping and going out with friends, family situations, school and work plans, and emotional issues. Emster made perhaps the most practical use of her blog. Before a trip to her hometown, she posted her planned schedule for the visit. She then asked her friends to check it against their schedules and call her with times when they could get together. Zeina, whose family rode out Hurricane Rita in 2005, used her blog to update all the rest of the family on their status. Princess of Arabia announced her high school graduation and college plans on her

blog, then posted pictures of the graduation afterward. Friends frequently commented with words of encouragement, questions about the entries, or even requests for phone calls. Especially for those bloggers whose face-to-face relationships have become long-distance relationships, blogs are used to maintain and reinforce face-to-face relationships.

### **Member Checks**

Zeina confirmed the overall findings of this study during member checks. She wished to expand upon the idea of identifying with one culture over the other:

I think you caught on to some great conclusions. I also want to mention that there are differing levels of connection to both cultures as well. For example, I tend not to link myself too closely with the Arabs in the US, as I feel most of them are TOO Americanized. And while I have taken many things from my upbringing in the US, I still find that my parents raised me in a way that links me closer to my friends in the Middle East. There seems to be a dominant culture of “Americanized” Arabs and a minority of Arabs that are less inclined to “fit in”. For example, whenever I am in Egypt... I never miss the US. However, when I am in the States, I always miss Egypt. This fact leads me to be different from the Arabs in the US and the Arabs in Egypt. Oh well, I guess this is more difficult to explain. Easier just to say that you are correct in what you said, just keep in mind that there is a spectrum and varying degrees of US acculturation.

None of the other bloggers had responded to the request for member checks at the conclusion of the writing of this report.

### **Reflexivity**

DeSouza described researcher reflexivity as, “More than a dear diary outline of events, reflexivity requires one to stand outside one’s own experiences and interrogate one’s role, values, beliefs, and assumptions underpinning one’s participation in the research.”<sup>2</sup> Throughout the process of conducting this study, as well as before beginning it, I questioned my own assumptions of MMENA women and of research in general.

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<sup>2</sup> Ruth DeSouza, “Motherhood, Migration and Methodology: Giving Voice to the ‘Other,’” *The Qualitative Report* 9 no. 3 (2004): 472, <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR9-3/desouza.pdf>, accessed April 2006.

During the study this was accomplished through use of extensive research notes in which I recorded my impressions and questioned my findings. I was concerned at times that my reading of the blogs would reinforce common stereotypes of MMENA women, for example, the position of women in relation to their families. After reflecting on this, rereading the blogs many times, and questioning myself, I came to the conclusion that these women, due to their position as immigrants or children of immigrants, were likely holding on more tightly to their traditional culture than those who had been in the United States longer.

I found that I personally identified with these women in their position between cultures and their apparent desire to explore where they fit in context of their blogs. I also grew to feel close to the women, although I did not communicate directly with any of them until after analysis of their blogs. My own values of honoring family, seeking spirituality, and valuing marriage likely sympathetically colored my interpretations of their posts. Because I am more oriented toward communalism than individualism myself, I tended to consistently view them in context of their family relationships and membership in the larger culture rather than only as stand-alone individuals.

### **Summary**

In sum, the MMENA bloggers in this study developed identity and built community through their blogs. They communicated and explored expressions of personal identity, gender identity, and cultural/ethnic identity. The dimensions of these identities intersected and overlapped in different ways for each blogger, some with consonance and others with dissonance. Finally, the bloggers created virtual communities or maintained face-to-face relationships through their blogs.





## CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

The findings of this study concur with many of the theories discussed in chapter two, particularly those related to MMENA identities. As these women used their blogs to negotiate identity and build community, they displayed the conflicts and paradoxes other researchers have documented in MMENA Americans. Their communication behavior also agreed with intercultural communication theories regarding those from non-dominant cultural groups and diasporic communities.

### **Identity Theories**

Ting-Toomey's identity negotiation theory<sup>1</sup> posited that self-presentation and conception are reinforced, supported, or challenged through intercultural communication. She identified eight dimensions of identity that are negotiated in intercultural communication. For the purposes of this study, only the primary identity dimensions were addressed (gender, cultural/ethnic, and personal) due to the limitations of a text-only analysis. In these dimensions, as discussed in chapter four, the bloggers negotiated their self-presentations and self-concepts. Two of the assumptions of Ting-Toomey's theory were particularly salient to the findings of this study. She noted that trust is created with similar others who reinforce one's own identity. This was evidenced in how the bloggers discussed relationships with those who were like them more than those who were different. Ting-Toomey also proposed that membership endorsements enhance feelings of

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<sup>1</sup> Stella Ting-Toomey, *Communicating Across Cultures* (New York: The Guildford Press, 1999), 26–54.

inclusion. This was displayed in the use of bloggings for affinity groups, concern for outsiders' perceptions of MMENA individuals and the group as a whole, and the frequent use of others' comments quoted in blog text to reinforce the blogger's position.

As noted above, these bloggers displayed a paradox of identity as described by Salaita<sup>2</sup> and Said.<sup>3</sup> All were born to parents who immigrated to the United States, therefore all of the bloggers considered themselves in some way American. They were educated in American schools and universities, watched American television, and grew up speaking English. They were not fully American, however, and all described themselves in some way as "Arab" and with other identifiers that were not simply "American." Each of them also nurtured the non-"American" part of their identity in some way: attending Arabic school on the weekends, visiting the homeland, cooking traditional foods, or wearing Islamic dress. These findings agree with Aoude's claim<sup>4</sup> that individuals in diasporic communities always deal with multiple identities as well as with Nagel and Staheli's perception of MMENA individuals as transnational.<sup>5</sup> The MMENA aspects of their identities were most often discussed and explored, reflecting Michael's statement that the attacked aspects of one's identities will come to the forefront.<sup>6</sup> Both

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<sup>2</sup> Steven Salaita, "Ethnic Identity and Imperative Patriotism: Arab Americans Before and After 9/11," *College Literature* 32 no. 2 (Spring 2005): 153, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia, *Edward Said: The Paradox of Identity* (London, New York: Routledge, 1999), 9–29.

<sup>4</sup> Ibrahim G. Aoude, "Maintaining Culture, Reclaiming Identity: Palestinian Lives in the Diaspora," *Asian Studies Review* 25 no. 2 (June 2001): 153–167, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Caroline R. Nagel and Lynn A. Staheli, "Citizenship, Identity and Transnational Migration: Arab Immigrants to the United States," *Space and Polity* 8 no. 1 (April 2004): 3, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>6</sup> John Michael, "Beyond Us and Them: Identity and Terror from an Arab American's Perspective," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 102 no. 4 (2003): 700–728, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

Aoude and Michael studied MMENA Americans, giving further credence to the idea that in today's United States, MMENA Americans face unique challenges regarding identity negotiation.

As Said proposed, identity must be spoken to be owned.<sup>7</sup> These blogs provided a place for the women, caught in the “contest between cultures,” to negotiate the differing aspects of their identities. As Langellier and Peterson described,<sup>8</sup> these women's blogs became a way to struggle over identities in an unstable world: they provided a stable, accessible “workshop” for identity construction. Reading the blogs in chronological order showed the development of identity for each woman. Rather than being a static, one-time construction, their identities evolved over time. Current events, life changes, or family issues affected how they presented themselves to the world. The apparent inconsistencies in their blogs, over time, were in fact the negotiations of their identities in a changing environment.

Perhaps a major part of the cultural contest for these women was the difference between the individualistic culture of the United States and the collectivism of the cultures of their heritage. Several of them described their dissatisfaction with the loneliness of American life. According to Hofstede, the individualism score for the United States is 91 (the highest in the world),<sup>9</sup> while the “Arab World” score is 38.<sup>10</sup> Muslim societies, in general, tend to have lower individualism scores. The world average

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<sup>7</sup> Ashcroft and Ahluwalia, *Edward Said: The Paradox of Identity*, 12

<sup>8</sup> Kristin M. Langellier and Eric E. Peterson, *Storytelling in Daily Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 173.

<sup>9</sup> Geert Hofstede, “Geert Hofstede Cultural Dimensions” [electronic resource], c. 2003, [http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede\\_united\\_states.shtml](http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede_united_states.shtml), accessed April 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., [www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede\\_arab\\_world.shtml](http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede_arab_world.shtml), accessed April 2006.

is 64,<sup>11</sup> indicating that the regions of these women's heritage are much more collectivistic than the world as a whole. They displayed few of the attributes of individualism, only at times appearing self-reliant and desiring to be wholly independent from family. Most of the entries reflected collectivistic sensibilities, such as care for the extended family, putting the needs of the group above personal needs, and close ties with friends and family. As Ting-Toomey noted, orientations toward individualism or collectivism play a major role in identity formation: those from individualistic cultures are more likely to define themselves in terms of independence and self-esteem, while those from collectivistic cultures depend on other groups members for group self-esteem and identity constructions.<sup>12</sup> The blogs in this study concur with this idea. The women who were more oriented towards individualism defined themselves in terms of self, individual plans, and personal achievements. Those who were more collectivism-oriented defined themselves in terms of their heritage, their position in family, and their interactions with in-group members.

In Tajfel's social identity theory,<sup>13</sup> both personal identity and the group's identity influence self-image. This was evident in the blogger's concern for outsiders' view of Muslims and Arabs. Because these women were more collectivistic than individualistic, Tajfel's theory may be even more applicable. Since group identity played such a major role in self-perception, it can be inferred that attacks (politically, in the media, or physical violence) on MMENA groups more deeply impact the bloggers than the same attacks

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ting-Toomey, *Communicating Across Cultures*, 76.

<sup>13</sup> H. Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

might impact more individualistic people. Similarly, Phinney asserted that the community plays a larger role in self-definition for a person from a non-dominant group than it does for dominant group members.<sup>14</sup> This confirms the relative sensitivity of these bloggers to disparagement of MMENA groups.

### **Community Theories**

Following Jones' definitions of a "virtual settlement,"<sup>15</sup> each of the blogs in this study could be considered a settlement containing cultural artifacts (posts, comments, images, audio, etc.). A settlement is a prerequisite to a virtual community, which develops when emotional ties and relationships form in context of the settlement. It is difficult to determine if each of the blogs in this study were virtual communities or simply extensions of face-to-face communities. Emotional ties and relationships did exist around these blogs, but with the available data it was not possible to discern if they were wholly virtual. Perhaps following Blanchard's ideas on "sense of community"<sup>16</sup> would be more helpful. She argued that this is an important factor to discover and consists of feelings of membership and influence, shared emotional connection, and need fulfillment. Based on this definition, it is reasonable to conclude that the blogs examined here all displayed sense of community between the authors and their readers. The readers influenced the content created by the bloggers; the bloggers in turn influenced the

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<sup>14</sup> Jean S. Phinney, "The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure: A New Scale for Use with Diverse Groups," *Journal of Adolescent Research* 7, 156–176.

<sup>15</sup> Quentin Jones, "Virtual-communities, Virtual Settlements and Cyber-archaeology: A Theoretical Outline," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 3 no. 3 (1997): 24, <http://search.epnet.com>.

<sup>16</sup> Anita Blanchard, "Blogs as Virtual Communities: Identifying a Sense of Community in the Julie/Julia Project," in L. J. Gurak, S. Antonijevic, L. Johnson, C. Ratliff, and J. Reyman, eds, *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community, and Culture of Weblogs* (2004), <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere>, accessed April 2006.

thinking of the readers. Subscriptions and participation in bloggings showed feelings of membership either in the blog itself or in the larger blogging community. Emotional connections were evident in posts and comments. As several bloggers explicitly discussed, their needs were met by having people listen to (read) their problems and dilemmas and offer advice. The blogs also created a sense of belonging in what could be considered a hostile national environment.

As Herring and her research team found, most blogs are not heavily interlinked across the entire blogosphere.<sup>17</sup> Rather, interest and identity groups form and are densely linked to each other. The blogs in this study supported this finding. None of them were linked outside their own areas of interest and most not outside their own cultural group. These findings also concurred with Marlow's conception of the blogosphere as a large number of smaller interlinked communities.<sup>18</sup> While the blogs studied here displayed some characteristics of the diasporic communities described by Hiller and Franz,<sup>19</sup> the bloggers' situations as children of immigrants made them less connected to the homeland than recent immigrants would be. These bloggers more closely mirrored Haddad's description<sup>20</sup> of the children of MMENA immigrants who struggle with reconciling the experiences of their parents to their own. They therefore tended to form communities of

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<sup>17</sup> Susan C. Herring, Lois Ann Scheidt, Sabrina Bonus, and Elijah Wright, "Bridging the Gap: A Genre Analysis of Weblogs," In Proceedings of the Thirty-seventh Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (Los Alamitos: IEEE Press, January 2004), <http://www.blogninja.com/DDGDD04.doc>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Cameron Marlow, "Audience, Structure and Authority in the Weblog Community," paper presented at the meeting of the 54th Annual Conference, International Communication Association, New Orleans (May, 2004), <http://web.media.mit.edu/~cameron/cv/pubs/04-01.pdf>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Harry H. Hiller and Tara M. Franz, "New Ties, Old Ties, and Lost Ties: The Use of the Internet in Diaspora," *New Media and Society* 6, no. 6 (2004): 732, <http://search.epnet.com>, accessed April 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, *Not Quite American? The Shaping of Arab and Muslim Identity in the United States* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2004), 51.

members of their own generation (and status as children of immigrants) rather than with those who were older or who had recently immigrated.

### **Limitations**

Because this study was a small-scale, in-depth qualitative inquiry of the blogging behaviors of a specific group of women, these findings are likely not generalizable to a larger population. However, it does offer insights into how these women negotiate identity and build community, further supporting the above-discussed theories.

The study dealt only with these women's visible interactions on their blogs; other items may have been deleted by the bloggers or made visible only to private groups. Therefore, it is not possible to be sure that the entire range of blogging behaviors by these women was analyzed. For example, one of the bloggers also maintained a video blog which was not included in this analysis. Others held extensive conversations in chatrooms or on other blogging services. While studying these other behaviors was not feasible for this study, their inclusion could have perhaps offered further insights. Similarly, the blogs themselves provided a very small slice of life for each of these women. If the original research design (including in-depth interviews) could have been followed, richer data about the women's self-conceptions and community formation may have been obtained. Participant observation, such as watching face-to-face how these women blog, may have also offered richer detail on how blogging integrates into the other aspects of their identity and community formation. Multiple coders or a research team would have provided helpful triangulation of the data.

In the initial research design, all the women included in the study would have been linked in the blogosphere. Due to the selection criteria for participants, this was not possible. Instead, only a few of the women were linked. If they had all been, perhaps



more information could have been gleaned on the formation of community for these bloggers. Additionally, it would have been helpful if the bloggers' responses from member checks could have been more fully integrated into the findings. Due to the time frame of the study, this was not possible.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

As discussed above, perception of the in-group by outsiders may more strongly affect MMENA Americans than other groups. Further research on this possibility would be helpful, particularly in arguing for sensitivity to MMENA Americans. A larger-scale examination of communication behaviors of MMENA women from different age ranges, social classes, and education levels similarly would offer a wider range of experiences. Similarly, more exploration of MMENA women's media creation and its effect on identity construction would provide insight into possible strategies to help American MMENA women with living in a dominant culture that is often hostile.

Ahmed's work on women's cultures as transmitters of ethics and morality would provide an interesting framework for future studies of MMENA women's communications. She suggested that today's literate, text-based Islam is less tolerant, ethical, and fair to women than orally transmitted Islam, traditionally the domain of women.<sup>21</sup> As moderate Muslims and those in the West are becoming increasingly concerned with the consequences of widespread Islamic fundamentalism, the perpetuation of women's oral traditions may offer a counter to the male-dominated texts. These oral traditions have the additional advantage of not being imposed by the West.

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<sup>21</sup> Leila Ahmed, *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—A Woman's Journey* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999), 276–291.

Future explorations may discover if blogs are becoming a transmitter of culture for those in diaspora without a face-to-face supportive community.

Orbe's description of co-cultural groups' communication strategies would be an interesting lens through which to examine MMENA women's communication behaviors. While his framework primarily addresses issues of social class, gender, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity, religion could also be considered an element of co-cultural identity. In that case, MMENA women are co-cultural on the basis of ethnicity, religion, and gender. Many would also be of different social class than the dominant group. Orbe's original study did not include any MMENA Americans. As they are a group often maligned by the dominant culture, it would be important to understand their strategies for communicating with outsiders. While the nature of this study did not allow in-depth examination of cultural integration (assimilation, accommodation, or separation) and communication styles (assertive, non-assertive, or aggressive) as Orbe described, a phenomenological approach as he discussed would offer helpful insight into how MMENA American communicate with others.<sup>22</sup> It may also help bring attention to the dominant culture's perceptions of MMENA Americans.

As noted in chapter two, MMENA American women are an understudied population. With current political and social feelings about MMENA Americans, it is important to understand as much as possible about intercultural communication in relation to this group.

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<sup>22</sup> Mark P. Orbe, *Constructing Co-cultural Theory: An Explication of Culture, Power, and Communication* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998), 50–120.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ashley Dyess Sink grew up in Sylacauga, Alabama. In 2000 she graduated from Judson College where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in English and music. In 2002 she moved to Beirut, Lebanon, where she taught English and worked with women. Upon her return to the United States in 2004, she married Justin Sink and subsequently relocated to Gainesville, Florida. She completed her Master of Arts in Mass Communication from the University of Florida in 2006, where she studied international and intercultural communication with an emphasis on the Middle East.